THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

DECEMBER, 1958

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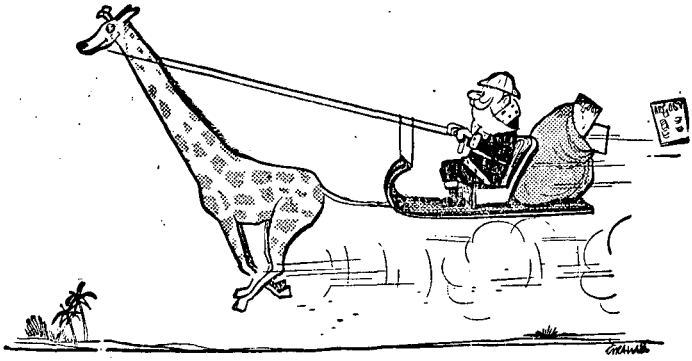

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ARGOSY

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Log Book

BEARING in mind the way most people who buy magazines turn first to the horoscope page, we decided recently that it was time Argosy readers were given a chance to learn their fate in the stars.

There was no need to call in expert help from outside. The staff of Argosy are psychic to a man. They need to be. When the telephone rings, they can foretell that it is going to be a pleading voice saying, " About five years ago you published a story—I think it was in a summer issue but I can't remember the title or the author—it was something about a river that thought. Can you let me have a copy of that issue? It's been haunting me ever since."

It is our pride to be able to trace these stories however obscure the clues—and when you consider that the five years sometimes turn out to be ten or twenty, and that, since 1940 alone, Argosy has published in the region of 2,160 stories, there can be quite a lot of research involved. Not long ago a reader wrote in to say that, when laying new lino, he found, underneath the old strip, half a page of Argosy with part of a poem about Potiphar's wife, no date . . . We found it, too.

Some day we are going to invest in a Giant Brain, and Old Uncle Horatio will sit reading back issues to it in his lunch-hour while it solemnly clicks and digests and indexes every word including the pictures. But till then our own brains have to bear the load, *and* interpret readers' sometimes bewilderingly individual recollections of stories they have enjoyed.

Anyway, on account of all this mind-reading practice we reckoned we could manage the dookering page, making use of Old Romany Horatio's ink pool and Zingaro Silver's working

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knowledge of astrology. We've narrowed the field a bit, since we ourselves never quite believe those all-purpose horoscopes announcing that you, your boss, *and* old Mrs. Jones down the road are all going to be lucky in love this week. So if you don't find yourself here, watch out another time.

Aquarius, January 20—*February* 18. If you are fond of oysters. Keep an eye on your oil investments and don't jump on any moving buses. You are bold and resourceful.

Pisces, February 19—*March* 20. If you're a habitual late riser. Don't pull anything in a hurry this month, neither strings, hair, nor switches. You are warm-hearted and generous.

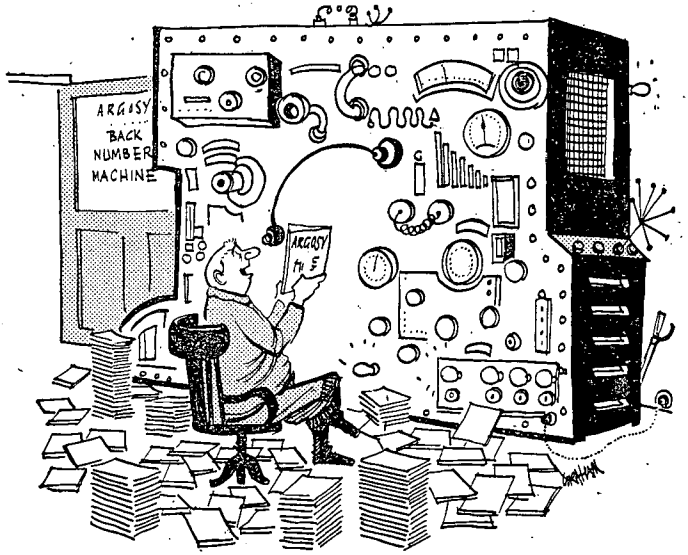
Aries, March 21—*April* 19. For bad spellers. Don't forget to lock up. There's a lot of the pioneer in your nature.

Taurus, April 20—*May* 20. If you're red-haired and a keen angler. Remember there are only three angles in a triangle. You are strong-minded and particular.

Gemini, May 21—*June* 20. If you're fair and live south of Capricorn. Have you stopped beating your wife? You're quick and alert, but you want to relax.

Cancer, June 21—*July* 22. If you were born on a Monday. Beware of the bull. You're loyal but a bit insensitive.

Leo, July 23—*August* 22. If you prefer tea to beer. You're noble and lovable, so leave your gun at home unless you've got a licence for it.



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Virgo, August 23—September 22. If you love the theatre. Don't believe those rumours about your boss. You are imaginative—sometimes too much so.

Libra, September 23—October 22. For those with black eyes. Tidy your desk drawer. You are judicious and confident.

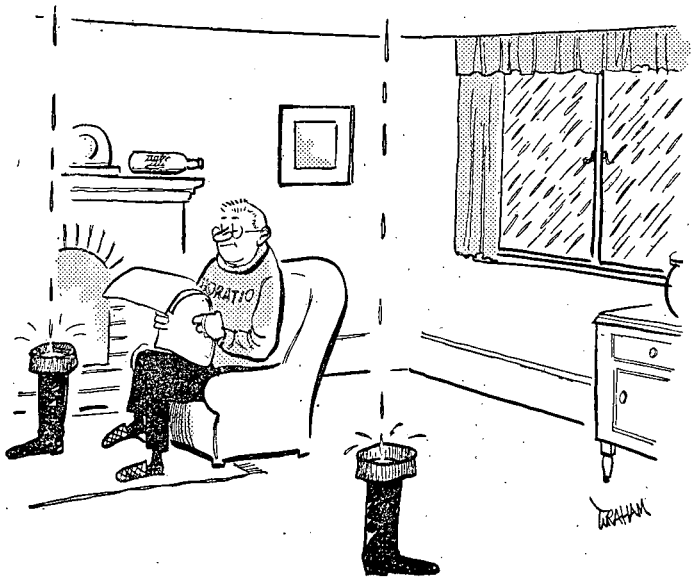
Scorpio, October 23—November 21. For those who love writing. Why not type out that story and send it to Argosy? You're cleverer than you suspect.

Sagittarius, November 22—December 21. If you are good at maths. Ever thought of dieting? You're a forceful personality.

Capricorn, December 22—January 19. For under-twenties. Whodunnit? Who killed Cock Robin? If you know, ring the police. You are ambitious, but capricious.

This issue of Argosy contains a vintage collection of new stories by favourite contributors H. E. Bates, Kersh, Eberhart, and Landon. New contributor this month **Manly Wade Wellman,** is American, was born in Portuguese West Africa, and says he went to school almost everywhere. He has written some 500 stories and 21 books, won the Edgar Allan Poe award for the best American non-fiction crime study of 1955, *Dead and Gone.*

JOHN SILVER



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SKI-LIFT

It was a man's length overhead—
bathed in a foam of stars

BY CURTIS W. CASEWIT

WHEN Mathias saw that he had the mountain all to himself he went into a crouch and let his skis run. The South American snow was packed tight, and he got his speed to almost forty miles an hour. He was moving so fast now that the ski-lift towers and the chairs flitted past the corners of his eyes in a patch of bright red. The sun had gone down, and the snow was a grey-blue, with long mauve shadows.

Now he hit the trail through the Araucarian trees, which were part palm, part pine, part cactus. It was darker here, and the tracks icy. But Mathias kept his skis in the grooves, hurtling round the curves as if in tram rails. Then he was out of the forest, swinging into the last slope, towards the ski-lift platform and the little town of Portillo with its big hotel.

He began to control his speed as he approached the lift machinery. Was Rojo still there? That would be good, Mathias thought. Then he wouldn't be bothering the girl.

"Olé! Yanqui!"

Mathias brought his skis to a stop. It was Rojo all right. He stood next to the lift—tall for a Chilean, especially for the pure Indio. "Ski-ing was good, no?"

"Wish I could stay," Mathias said. "What a place! And I've really squeezed my last day. To the last minute!"

"Last minute? You are departing?"

"On the Santiago train."

The Chilean cocked his dark head. "And Antonita?"

"She's coming, too," Mathias said evenly. He suddenly felt exhilarated from the run down the mountain. The three weeks away from the mines had done him good. Especially in Portillo. That was where he had met Antonita.

"By tomorrow at this time, it'll all be over," Mathias said. "By then we'll be married. At the house of Antonita's parents."

Rojo's handsome face fell.

"Don't take it so hard," Mathias said. "There'll be plenty more senoritas for you."

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"Never like her. Like my Antonita!"

Mathias put his hand on the other's shoulders. "You're just eighteen, Rojo. A boy."

"I am a man!" Rojo cried. "And I want to talk about Antonita. I must!"

Mathias nodded. He knew what to expect. They'd been over it before, with the Chilean pouring out his excited young heart, begging Mathias to leave him his first and last and only love, Antonita. Every day for the last week, Rojo had begged, whispered, cried, shouted. Leave Antonita here! She was his valley, his hill, his sky, his ocean. There would be no one else. Ever. Ever. Ever.

Mathias had listened patiently each time, out of friendliness, watching the swarthy face change expression, the large dark eyes glitter, the long, black hair falling across the brow as he kept pleading.

Well, I'll have to listen once more, Mathias decided. For the last time. He said aloud, "Have some coffee with me. We can talk at the hotel."

"No, no," Rojo said. "I am not dressed for the Portillo." He pointed to his mechanic's overalls, to his battered ski boots. "See for yourself. And I must be private with you." His voice rose, all tension now. "There is much to say. And it is only among us two men." He was nervous. His hands fidgeted. "You wish to take away Antonita. So you must permit me at least to speak with you."

"Of course," Mathias said. He'd talk to Rojo. He could feel a mixture of pity and victory. It had been child's play to take away Antonita from this love-struck boy.

Robert Mathias had proposed after ten days. He could see that an illiterate eighteen-year-old like Rojo would never have made a husband for Antonita.

"I will start again the lift," Rojo was saying. "We go up on top of the mountain. We can speak in the refugio."

"The lodge? Isn't it closed at this hour?"

Rojo pulled out something black. "I have the key. Or you are afraid, no?"

"Don't be a fool." Mathias watched the other's face, and this time those dark eyes held no plea, but open hatred. He's jealous, Mathias thought. He's liable to do the maddest things.

He glanced quickly at Rojo's overalls. They didn't bulge anywhere: the old ski boots were tight, the torn socks pressing against the trousers—no room for a weapon.

Mathias wasn't afraid. He'd fought far stronger and more experienced men. He'd wrestled at college, boxed, and learnt

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judo in the Marines. And at thirty, he was still in splendid condition. But he didn't like surprises. Maybe I ought to search him, Mathias thought. But Rojo was suddenly out of sight, starting the ski-lift.

The single metal chairs with their wooden seats appeared between the girders to climb towards the deserted lodge. The South American boy was already being carried upwards, skis trussed under his feet, ski sticks dangling in his hands.

"We must distribute the weight," Rojo called. "Take the tenth chair behind me!"

Should he back out now? This excursion would waste a lot of his last evening. But then he knew that he would look cowardly if he didn't go. So Mathias sat down, too. Soon he was hoisted off the platform into the air, his seat clicking past the first metal tower. A darkening mist lay over the mountain, but he could still see the Chilean about ten seats farther up. Why the distance? Mathias wondered. Surely this lift was powerful enough to bear his weight anywhere?

The lift towers were no longer red, but pitch black against the dark grey of the snow, which spread on all sides like an immense net. Part of the summit was rocky, and topped by a crest of ice. It made one jagged, cutting line, with the small square of the refugio.

After twenty minutes, Mathias saw his guide get off. Rojo disappeared into the lift shed. Why didn't he go to the lodge?

Then Mathias knew. He felt his heart lurch. How stupid of him! Rojo had cut the electric current! Mathias' chair was now suspended high over the black mass of rocks, miles above Portillo.

Mathias felt a flash of anxiety. He could hear the Chilean's skis crunch downwards, grating to a stop somewhere beneath. Then there was silence.

Maybe he has a gun, Mathias thought. I just didn't spot it.

"Yanqui!"

Mathias waited for the shot, teeth clamped together. There was no wind, but a glacial air pushed down from the Andean crest. He began to shiver. There were goose-pimples on the back of his neck.

"Can you hear me?" Rojo called.

Mathias didn't answer. It was quite dark now. He can't see me, Mathias thought. That's why he's calling. He wants my position. Then he'll fire at the sound of my voice.

"Listen to me!" Rojo shouted. "Antonita is *mine*. Mine before, mine now, mine always. You were still in Yanqui country when I danced with my Antonita at the hotel. For many

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nights, cheek to cheek, I danced with Antonita." The boy's voice rose a tone, crying through the night. "I kissed her. She is passionate about me. I love her!"

So do I, Mathias thought.

"Take the train, Yanqui! Take it alone. Leave Antonita to me. Only if you promise this will I make the lift work, and liberate you!"

Mathias did not reply. A small, cold wedge of moon started creeping out behind the summit. It grew chillier; Mathias could feel his limbs beginning to numb. It would be a rough night. But he didn't intend to give in.

"Answer me! You leave Portillo?"

"That's right. But not alone. I'm taking Antonita with me." He wondered where she was now. At the small, two-room cabin, no doubt. Saying adios to the other secretary of the hotel's travel agency, where she'd worked. Or packing. Bent intently over her leather suitcase.

Mathias could see the scene: her lithe hands folding this and that garment, quickly, yet with precision, her feet skating across the floor tiles. She was part Spanish—black hair, blue eyes, and a head full of life, languages, opinions.

"Antonita has made her choice!" Mathias said.

"Ah, si. Si. And it is me she wishes."

"Go and ask her."

"You, Yanqui, are trying to come between us. Depart from Portillo tonight!"

"And if I don't?"

"Then you will die. No one has ever descended from this altitude. In the morning, you will be frozen, if you have not gone crazy before, and jumped into the rocks. You will die. In one or another way."

"And you?"

"I will be gone. With Antonita!"

Mathias gripped the arm of his chair, looking down. He could see Rojo in the moonlight now, small and nervous like a moth on a layer of salt. Mathias said, "You think she'll come with you? Just because you can do the samba? You're only a child to her. She'll never go away with you."

"Then I will force her. I have a gun in my room!"

"You'll kidnap her?"

"I am not worse than you, Yanqui. You are a robber, stealing her from me. I give you one last chance."

Last chance? Mathias thought. He wasn't going to beg for his life. He was man enough to get himself out of this.

"You will die!"

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Mathias lifted one ski stick, and hurled it, point downwards. He missed Rojo on the snow field; the ski stick landed in the rocks directly below, vibrating. Mathias tossed the other ski stick, aiming more to the right, but the Chilean had started his descent.

Mathias turned his head furiously. His eyes followed the small form as it sped downward through the moonlight. Rojo knew the terrain; he kept a straight, fast course until he vanished among the Araucarian trees.

Now the sound of the skis died down, too, and for the first time the silence of the huge mountain roared in Mathias' ears.

He pulled out his cigarettes. He had two left; he never brought more than three or four to the slopes in the morning. He took out his matches, and lit up, inhaling deeply. The anger slowly went, and he felt calm again. He was stranded. But panic wouldn't help. He'd have to take stock of things. Methodically. He was a mining engineer; and his mind ran to logic. He'd often been praised for his company reports.

He sucked at his cigarette. Now what was his altitude? He guessed it at 11,000 feet. He leaned carefully over the chair, peering at the deathly pile of boulders under him, flanked by a wide expanse of frozen snow. He knew the spot.

The rocky ground was far below him. I can't jump, he decided. That'd be suicide. He'd jumped about thirty feet in training, but this was four times as much. He pitched the cigarette stub downwards. He couldn't see it extinguish.

Keep your nerve, he told himself. Keep thinking. Portillo was five miles down. Nobody would ever hear him. He couldn't even see the hotel from this spot. His mind's eye pictured the windows; a hundred of them must be shining like bright gold just now, and he could imagine the warm lobby, the people stretched out in front of the fire in their after-ski boots. Cosy, cosy. The bar would be serving gin con gin; the orchestra, playing softly in the clean, large dining-room, where people were eating—while he was hungry, cold, and cramped, stuck in a metal chair at the end of the world.

It was about twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit now. But the temperature would continue to fall. If he stayed awake and kept in motion—however limited—he might last out the night. In the morning the lift would start again, and he'd reach the top then. Or would Rojo return and stalk him? Unlikely. Rojo would have to come on skis. And he had no time for a three-hour climb if he really wanted to catch that train.

Mathias had his leather mittens: that was good. But because

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of the sunny afternoon, he'd left the windproof parka in his room. Already the cold came through his sweater, nibbling at his stomach. He drew up his legs for brief comfort. Now his chest was cold. He pummelled it with his hands. The sudden motion made the chair sway an inch.

Interesting, he decided. Maybe he could find a way of letting the chair roll down? A metal bar ran upwards from behind the backrest, made a bend, and connected with the wheel atop the steel cable. Could he get this track wheel to move?

It was worth investigating. But first he had to get rid of his skis. He loosened the bindings, tossing the skis in the direction of the snow to his right. He couldn't risk breaking those skis, or have them run away.

Luck was with him. The skis soared like javelins, and when he looked again, he saw them stuck in the snow, tips up.

Now he seized the small metal pipe above his head, and cautiously rose to his feet. The rubber under his ski boots gave him a good hold on the wooden seat, and with his mittens he had a firm grip on the chair bar.

For a minute, Mathias stood there—a small speck above miles of wilderness, inspecting the lift wheel. It was firmly anchored on the track cable. Only the machinery could make this thing start.

Mathias slid down again with disappointment. His breath steamed as if he were still smoking.

Maybe Rojo was right. Maybe no man ever got out of this damned spot unless he went crazy in this open, immobile cage above the rocks, and leapt to his death.

Mathias gritted his teeth with anger. Rojo had planned a childish and terrible vengeance. Why hadn't he used a bullet instead? Chileans were good shots, the best soldiers in South America, especially the Indios, like Rojo.

The last week must have been torture for Rojo, every day a little worse. Mi Antonita, he had said, talking as though he owned the girl—and all because of a few dances, and a kiss.

In Antonita's eyes, the youth obviously didn't count any longer. Or did he? Rojo would be in the valley by now, changing into his suit, his one, tight, mauve suit, knotting his tie; maybe packing his few things for the train. Would she go with him without force? Mathias felt a chilly stick, like an icicle, crawl down his back. His nose, ears, neck were exposed to the stinging air. "Watch out," he said aloud. "There's Senor Frostbite!"

He rubbed his face, then pounded one hand against his forearms and shoulders. No cap, he thought. No parka. No hood. They have it better in Siberia.

He looked at his wristwatch. Ten to nine. He must have been

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a prisoner an hour now. He'd promised to phone Antonita at eight. Then they'd meet at the train at eleven o'clock, she'd explained in her fluent, melodious English. Had Rojo reached her by now? "And I'm stuck up here," he said, talking aloud.

He turned his head towards the moonlit mountains below, as if he could see the people round their warm stoves, next to their central heating. Cold, cold, cold. He lit his second and last cigarette, then got to his feet once more, listening. The silence was vast, like a shell pressing against his ears.

Then he heard new sounds: the cold air humming in the cable, whispering in the steel girders of the towers. The closest tower was about twenty yards below. Mathias studied it. The light was so bright now that he could see every detail: the red beams criss-crossing against the brownish rocks, the step-ladders on the side of the structure. Step-ladders? Naturally, he thought. The mechanics had to repair the lift.

Mathias tossed away the cigarette. He felt a sudden flash of hope. He would be safe if he could get to that tower! But how? There was only one route. The steel cable. Hell, I'm no acrobat, he thought. I can't walk steel ropes.

Then something new struck his mind. He laughed out loud as the plan took shape . . . First, he had to climb up there. He examined the cable. It was a man's length over his head, bathed in a foam of stars. He nodded. He'd make it.

He studied the route, on his feet, pressing his shins against the wooden backrest of the chair for a little warmth. It was twenty-five past nine now. His stomach groaned audibly; he'd eaten nothing since breakfast. He had skipped lunch because it was his last day on skis, and he'd wanted to get the most out of it.

He began to feel a little sick with hunger. He probed his pockets for a cigarette. Not a butt left. And they were smoking luxuriously in the valley, he thought, and some skiers would still be at their rich Chilean dinners—their lobsters and steaks, their fruits and cheeses. Drinking wine, too, in the snug, warm bar. Rojo must be with Antonita now.

I must escape, Mathias said to himself. For her sake, just as much as for mine. I've wasted enough time already.

He was cold and hungry, but in an hour it would be worse: he'd be stiffer and his co-ordination would be sapped. If he got busy now, he might still stand a chance. He would try the twenty-yard crawl down that cable, and force from his mind the thought of the rocky precipice below. If this steel wire supported a hundred skiers by day, it would hold him now.

Mathias stepped on the chair's armrests. The bend of the

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metal pipe was overhead now. He pulled himself up, thighs circling the metal tightly. Half a man's length up, he paused, hanging like a fireman. With one big, gloved hand round the pipe, he let his other hand reach for the track wheel. Good. Just as he'd hoped, it didn't move. He gradually pulled himself up on one arm until his second hand held the cable, and all the while he kept the rubber soles of his boots wedged against the bend of the pipe.

This gave him support. But he had to stop again. The thin Chilean air made his breath come fast. He might have been a space pilot in a new rocket. He kept watching the stars. No use looking down. His next move was risky. He had to shift from a vertical position to a horizontal one. He had to lie down on the cable. He let his hands explore, then hold on to the farthest spot of the wire, his feet steady on the pipe curve.

He got one leg over the wire, and rode it; the next moment, working swiftly, he put the centre of chest and stomach on the hard, cold, steel rope, at the same time looping his ankles round the steel.

He'd always kept his muscles in good condition. And he'd been in tough spots before. That Belgian coal mine when it caved in. He'd dug himself out with the others, spadeful by spadeful, while the rotten air decreased by the second. But he'd made it.

And he'd make that belly-descent now. The incline wasn't too steep. He began to inch downward, letting his gloved hands do the work. It was dirty work; the cable was sticky with grease. He felt the constant cold smear on his chin. But he kept moving, inch by inch, high above the terrible drop.

He still didn't look down. His wet, sore eyes were on nothing but the red top beams of the tower. Whenever he stopped, his teeth chattered with the cold. Like a swimmer, he feared cramp most of all. So he began to move again, but the pain of the metal rubbing against the inside of his legs was hell. The frozen cable cut into his chest, and he was sure that, despite his boots, he'd already drilled a deep wound into his ankles.

The grease was everywhere. On his gloves, trousers, shirt, sweater, smudging his nose, his cheeks. He could even taste the filthy oiliness on his tongue. But he kept crawling. He dared not stop, or he'd be lost midway. His watch told him his progress. In half an hour, he had done ten yards.

After five more yards, he saw lights wavering somewhere beyond the tower. The hotel? Impossible. You couldn't see it from up here. Besides, the Portillo had three hundred rooms, and there were only a dozen lights. They looked as if they were

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coming towards him. Each time he gained a few inches the yellow flickers came a few inches nearer. I'm going crazy, he thought, just as Rojo had said. I'm delirious, like those thirst-racked Sahara travellers who see water fountains.

He shut his eyes angrily, his arms pulling his body in the darkness now. He felt perfectly sane, despite the pain and the cold and the hunger.

Suddenly his fists hit something big, solid. The obstacle broke his rhythm, made him spin about in a sickening, heart-stopping half circle. When he opened his eyes, he felt a stab of terror. The cable was above him now! He hung underneath it, but then he knew that his ankles and hands still had a hold. He slowly turned his head.

The tower was next to him.

The lights were brighter now, like individual fires. The rocks had ended, and he could see that there was snow under this lift tower. He held his breath, measuring the distance from his boots to the cross girders. " I'm mad," he muttered, " but here goes!"

His brain still worked; his muscles obeyed him. He took the risk and, within an instant, he had his feet on a horizontal metal beam, while his gloved hands held on to the other. Then he was on the step-ladder—it took a huge effort—and then on the frozen ground.

Now he stood on the earth again, his chest heaving, his body shaking all over. He was chilled through and through, and he shivered and sweated at the same time. His legs were so weak that he couldn't stand any longer. He had to stretch out on the hard, icy mountain. He could scarcely see, despite the bright moon and the even brighter lights approaching.

But he lived. He'd won. " Good man!" he said aloud, a little madly, laughing into the night. Maybe Rojo was laughing, too, over his own victory. Perhaps Antonita really loved him.

Mathias dizzily looked at his wristwatch: a quarter past ten. He would get that train. Just a little rest. The snow made a good, hard bed. " I'm going to freeze," he said aloud. " I must move." But exhaustion held him down like lead. He resolved to rest for just three minutes, then climb up to his skis. Meanwhile, he wiped the grease from his face. His eyes were afire: the lights burnt all round him. Torches, and people, too. The mountain patrol.

" Senor Mathias! Senor! Senor!"

" Ah, yes," he said voicelessly, with his lips. A hand held a plastic cup to his mouth. Hot coffee. It went down his throat beautifully.

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He could feel himself lifted on to a toboggan, and covered with a blanket. "Robert!" a Spanish voice sang. A pair of blue eyes came close to his; black hair nuzzled against his forehead. "It is me, Antonita! I told them to search. And we found you. But what happened?"

He shrugged. There was plenty of time to tell her. Rojo hadn't harmed her. She'd come just in time. She might have saved his life. Alone, could he ever have risen from the snow?

He could feel fingers on his face now, checking for frostbite.

"Senor Mathias," someone said. "Your leg is good? We thought you perhaps had broken a leg."

He sat up at the side of the toboggan. "I'm all right," he said hoarsely. "All in one piece." He was glad his speech had returned. He said to Antonita, "Did you see Rojo?"

"Rojo?" the girl repeated. "No, I must have missed him. After you did not phone, I went to the hotel. I looked everywhere for you. At first, I was afraid you had changed your mind about me. Then I was afraid that you were in danger. I found out that you had not returned from the mountain. So I gathered the patrol. If Rojo came to my house, he was too late."

She pressed against Mathias now, oblivious of the men. "Why worry about Rojo? If you feel you can make the train, we shall have to hurry into the valley, and get your luggage."

Mathias allowed himself to be taken down on the toboggan. But in Portillo he insisted on getting up. His strength was coming back. He managed to walk from the hotel to Antonita's cabin to see about her suitcase.

The adobe cabin was lit softly by the moon. Mathias caught sight of a figure sitting on the stairs. It was Rojo. He had on his Sunday best—the tight, mauve suit. His handsome head was in his hands. He had no gun. He'd never owned one.

When Mathias came close, his arm through Antonita's, the youth looked up. He had been crying. His cheeks were still wet. A sob started in his throat.

"Now, now," Antonita said softly in her language. "A man must not weep! Or are you a little boy for ever?" She touched his shoulder gently, but only once. Then stepping past him, she unlocked the door. Mathias followed her silently.

When they came out again with her case, Rojo was gone.

★ ★ ★

PARKIAN SHOT

Parking space : an unfillable opening in an unending line of cars near an unapproachable bus stop.

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LUCK OF THE TIDE

"I know the woman," he said with an odd smile

BY LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

COLLINS had tramped over half the globe, and now it was only the more obscure spots that knew him: ports a vessel might scorn to put in at, beaches haunted by humanity that any clean sea creature cast up in a storm might have crawled away from in self-respect. It's a bad place to get when you envy your fellow men a slice of luck because your own is out. You're down deep when you sink that far.

The man Collins envied went by the name of Smith.

Heaven only knew what brought him East.

There was something different about Smith, something oddly refined and fastidious; and it was this difference that a man like Collins could get to hate. There are things of which you don't wish to be reminded. It was a feeling shared by others on that beach.

Even the way Smith housed himself was an offence. You might call it a lean-to, but it had a certain character, goading to those who had sloughed off all that sort of thing. Contrived of all manner of salvage, live greenery had been carefully trained over and about it, and exotic flowers bedecked the doorway. Inside, believe it or not, were shelves lined with books.

Several times Collins had joined in forays against it, bent on destroying something that was a reproach and a reminder, but Smith was always back, patiently rebuilding. That happened in the days before the woman came.

Nobody knew where she came from or how she fell in with Smith, but—perhaps in a restless mood—one day he shipped in a small native craft that nosed among the islands, and when he returned he wasn't alone. Rumour said they had stood up before some itinerant missionary, and taken vows.

The woman was, in her own way, attractive; and you saw that young though she still must be in years, this was like a second blooming, a kind of miracle.

Life, which can make you old before your time, can blossom anew in the right atmosphere.

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So it was with this girl. Her face grew soft whenever she looked at Smith.

Watching her, the beach indulged in ribald though envious laughter. They reckoned a woman like this should be vulnerable, and one time, when Smith had gone to forage for supplies, they put it to the test.

"Boys," Smith's woman said, "you see this place? Everything in it—even me—is his. Not to be touched. Not to be interfered with in any way. Understand? Let's get it straight, and keep it that way."

The small revolver she held in her hand was language they understood and respected. You could see she knew how to handle men—men like Collins and these others—quietly, firmly facing them, never raising her voice. It is when an animal at bay turns to run that the pack leaps.

Smith didn't know what fine defences he had, Collins surmised. He accepted his luck as he would a clean wind off the ocean. He'd found companionship and happiness, and love. His luck was in; and for him this beach became paradise. You could see that.

It didn't matter that his books were over her head; she'd sit and let him read to her, and you'd swear she was listening to music.

For all this, Collins hated and envied the man, Smith.

Lying on the beach within earshot, he would listen and curse. Why should Smith have what was denied him? No woman, he thought bitterly, had ever cared to hear more of his voice than a useful monosyllable or two; or if they had, the memory was an echoing mockery from days, deep foundered, and lost. Certainly, no woman had ever exhibited for him a love that asked nothing but to fulfil itself unquestioningly.

The hatred grew in Collins until it had all the makings of a deep-etched obsession; but some final shred of decency mourned in him, urging him—before the ugly growth became ruinous to these two—to find a new place in which to brood, a place far removed from them. He would stand sometimes at a small distance from this lean-to, which contained another man's luck, and finger his unshaven chin, and feel the wind pull at the shreds of his garments, and the sand sift over his bare toes, and he would mutter, "Got to get out of here. Got to get away," knowing that he was in constant danger of letting the explosive thing in him work violence.

Still he delayed; but when one day a ship put in, he went down to the waterfront. A fat grease-spot of a captain looked

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him up and down, spat overside, and laughed at the idea of Collins wanting to come aboard to work his passage.

"You work?" the captain said drily.

"Try me."

The captain took another look, as you might glance at a specimen worth perhaps closer inspection.

"O.K.," he conceded. "If you're willing to work, come aboard."

As the lift of long rollers met the ship's bows, Collins looked back at the place he was leaving. He could see the beach he had quitted. He could even see the figures of Smith and his woman. They had come out to watch the infrequent sight of a vessel putting to sea.

In a sudden renewal of his envy, Collins stood white-knuckled at the rail.

A voice said, "What's the attraction?"

Collins slewed around. He saw amusement in the captain's eyes; he saw also the glasses through which undoubtedly the captain had been looking.

"None of your business," Collins said truculently.

"Probably not," the captain smiled in his dry way. "Try the glasses. You'll see her better."

"You can't see much from here," Collins growled. "Even with those."

"Only that she is a woman. Try them."

Collins brushed the offer aside. He made off along the deck, steadying himself against the lurch of the vessel. He heard the captain's chuckling laughter. Deep buried in the man's fat-folded face were penetrating eyes; they made Collins uneasy.

You read in him a long and varied experience of life and a kind of Olympian detachment, as if he had got past the sorrows and joys, the heights and depths of life, and now studied his fellow-men as a biologist might in his laboratory, but with more amusement, with a keen sense of the comic. That was how Collins read this ship's master. Collins was here on terms, and he meant to keep them. He was here to work his passage. When he chanced on a likely spot he would quit.

Collins really worked. It was against his inclinations, but he put his rusting muscles into it if only to confound the captain's prophecies. And presently, it seemed, the captain took a kind of liking to him. He'd ask Collins into the cabin for a drink and a chat.

"You puzzle me," the captain told him one night. "Ever since I was knee high I was a sucker for puzzles. You're not the

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working type, Collins. You're a scummy, beachcombing ne'er-do-well. I should know. What are you getting out of coming with me?"

After a couple more drinks, Collins told him.

The captain, lounging in his chair, sat up straight.

"Describe this woman to me," he said.

Collins did so.

The master's fat body began to rumble and shake. Collins stared at him; then suddenly, angrily, struck the table with a fist that was growing less flabby with hard work.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

The captain's laughter rumbled away. He cocked an eye at Collins and rubbed one cheek.

"I know the woman," he said, with an odd smile.

"Go on," Collins said.

The captain went on. He knew the woman, he repeated. He knew what she was. He knew all about her. Shrugging, he rubbed his heavy jowls. He told Collins forthrightly, sparing her nothing.

"Well," he said, "so she's dropped anchor. And found good anchorage. I suppose all we can say is, good luck to her. Eh, Collins?"

He studied Collins. "Yes or no?"

Collins left him. He didn't wish to be studied like a specimen under a glass. He went out into the airless night. It pressed down on him, hot and humid. The decks reeked with cargo and humanity. There was no wind; only a sickening lurch from the long swells coming in on the beam, an occasional crest rising white and ghostlike in the darkness, touched with phosphorescence. The course of the ship seemed as futile and aimless as his own life. Huddled men, half naked, awoke to curse his passing. He remembered the captain sitting there, gazing into space as he had left him. He thought of Smith and laughed, and the laugh caught in his throat.

Secret as any dark desire, the thing grew in Collins. He no longer forgathered or drank with the captain, and this defection was accepted without comment. At times, Collins would feel the man's eyes, in their folds of flesh, studying him. But he stuck with the ship. Sooner or later she would return him whence he came. And, as if it were a predestined thing, there at last they dropped anchor and eventually eased alongside the rotting jetty.

It was night as they nosed in—a slow, tortuous business—but it was a landfall, a harbour entrance that set Collins' pulse beating too fast. The beach lay hidden in the velvet darkness.

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In the hot stillness of the night he slipped ashore without grace of farewell. If he had any fear that the captain would try to dissuade or stop him, it was dissipated. The master gave no sign, and neither warned him nor argued with him.

Collins was back on his own; and what he proposed to do was his own concern. Until the night paled into a flaming dawn, quick and lurid out of the east, he lay on the sand waiting, dozing a little now and then and, when he did, his dreams were troubled.

In the broad daylight again he lay there on the familiar beach listening to the man's voice, and the tantalizing sound of a woman's laughter; and, as he listened, the new knowledge he had in him was like a power and glory.

He could see the ship still in port. That was no longer of any interest to him. He was on business of his own, to be savoured, not to be hurried. He would bide his time. Sooner or later the man, Smith, would go to forage for supplies, and the chance would come. It was something to cherish, to anticipate.

When the time came he moved, barefooted, silently over the white sand. His shadow fell upon the flowers planted by Smith's door.

The woman heard the soft movement in the sand and came to see who and what it was.

Collins said nothing, he just stood there, arms folded, looking at her, smiling a queer smile, and then matching steps deliberately as she backed away. From just inside the vine-hung doorway, she reached and brought out the small revolver.

"You know something?" he said, and again that sense of power grew in him—a strange uneasy glory uplifting him because now he had weapons of his own. "That—" he flicked a scornful finger at the little revolver—"is no good any more. No good." There was only the sound of both of them breathing, too tensely, too fast, as if already she could read in his eyes the thing he was about to say. "You see," Collins said, "I know all about you now. Everything. I got it from a fat fool of a captain." His sense of power over her was heightened as he saw a sickness for her past in her eyes. But she spoke at last very quietly.

"Who else knows?"

"Nobody—yet."

Her glance went to the weapon in her hand, then met his.

"It would be self-defence," she said, but her face was drained and her voice shook. There was no sureness left.

"You wouldn't kill me," he said. "Not you."

"What would I be killing?" she asked him. "A man?"

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It was less a taunt than a question. And the sudden flush, that had come as she asked it, faded away. Quickly she concealed the little weapon.

Smith was approaching. He came up to where they were and put down what he had been carrying. His glance went to the woman, and then to Collins, and then back to the woman again.

He said uncertainly, "We have a—visitor?"

"Yes," the woman nodded.

Again Smith's glance travelled from her to Collins and back to her.

He said, "What does the fellow want?"

"He'll tell you," the woman said.

A small wind blew in from the sea, swaying the heads of the flowers by the door, moving the translucent leaves of the vine, lending sibilance to the loose white sand, stirring the tendrils of the woman's hair.

Seconds only passed, but all of Collins' past and future were in them. He sensed again his power to smash, to destroy; and savage desire moved appallingly in him. Against it he could oppose only a final shred of decency, a "thin echo that faintly mourned a man's decay." It is possible that at this moment the unprayerful patterns of his life altered by a single thread.

He heard himself speaking at last. Not the words he had planned. Not at all the words he had rehearsed in his mind, anticipating this moment.

"I was wondering," he heard himself mumbling to the man, Smith, "I was wondering—could I maybe get hold of one of your books?"

The tautness left Smith.

"Why," he said heartily, "it's a pleasure. Pick any one you like."

He indicated the shelves full of worn, gradually moulding volumes; and Collins, suddenly faced with having to make a choice, felt embarrassed and lost.

Swiftly, gracefully, the woman moved to a shelf and picked one.

"How about this?" Her voice betrayed her only to Collins; he knew.

He hardly glanced at the book, but said, "Yes, that'll be fine."

She came with him to the door. He could sense the tautness in her, as if she was still afraid to trust the miracle. He saw the gratitude in her eyes. Let her not push that too far. Let her make nothing of it, or he'd smash something. Scorn of his own softness, his failure to profit, spread through him already like a plague.

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He said roughly, "Keep the damn book, I don't want it!" But in a low voice so that the man, Smith, wouldn't hear; and he pushed it at her, but she said, "No, you keep it. To—remind you. Keep it, please, I'd like you to have it."

No woman in many years had spoken to him this way. Not with mere useful monosyllables. Not with coarse badinage. Not with pity, which he would have rejected angrily, but as a woman to a man.

He took the book and left her. His feet floundering in the deep loose sand of the beach he was leaving for ever, he walked almost drunkenly until he reached better going on ways that led him to the harbour. The ship was still there. He went aboard as if it were his right. The captain was on deck; he gave Collins a glance as he strode up the gangplank, but kept his own counsel. You could judge nothing from his face. But, a few moments later, he turned and gave orders to cast off.

The ropes were loosed; the gangplank came up; the ship eased from the rotting wharf. Collins lent no hand, as yet. He stood by the rail. He watched the land grow small. He watched the sea grow large. There was a clean wind off the ocean. Spray slanted from the froth at the vessel's bow; it showered on the deck.

Collins heard a movement behind him; the bulky shadow of the captain fell on him.

"I thought you'd come," the captain said. "I gave myself odds on it. Why do you suppose I held my ship in this god-forsaken port?" He rubbed his chin, eyeing Collins narrowly. "Well," he said, "just what did you get out of it?"

Collins cursed; it was the only expression he had.

"A book," he said.

The captain held out his hand for it. A thin volume; not even promisingly fat. Not much reading there. The title on the cover had long since lost its gilt legibility.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I haven't even looked," Collins said. "She picked it. She gave it to me."

The captain fingered it.

"Do so," he said, handing it back. "By all means do so."

Collins obeyed. He stared at the title page. He said the words aloud. *Songs of Innocence*, by William Blake. He flipped the pages and words sprang up at him:

Such, such were the joys
When we, all girls and boys,
In our youth time were seen
On the Echoing Green . . .

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He stared at it, then slammed the book shut. "So that's what I get out of it," he said. "A kid's book!"

The captain looked at the book again, and then at Collins. For a moment he didn't speak, and when he did there was something new and surprising in his voice—a gruff gentleness.

"And what goes with it," he said. "And what goes with it, Collins."

Collins stared at the ship's master, but already he was in motion along the deck; and Collins was alone. He turned and looked over the sea, and his lips repeated the captain's words, "*And what goes with it.*" He knew then. It had been put in words for him, but already the seed of it was in his heart.

He had been given a second chance; he had been tossed something a man of his sort could use. He straightened his shoulders, and on his face was the look of a man on whom has blown, by some unasked, unsought miracle of grace, the very breath of God. A sense grew in him again of power and glory, not destructive but creative; a thing not of himself. He lifted his head and sniffed a known wind that came across the vastness of the sea. It seemed to him that it even smelt differently—as maybe it had when he was a boy. A salt thing. A clean thing, primal, and spacious, and fresh as the morning of the world.

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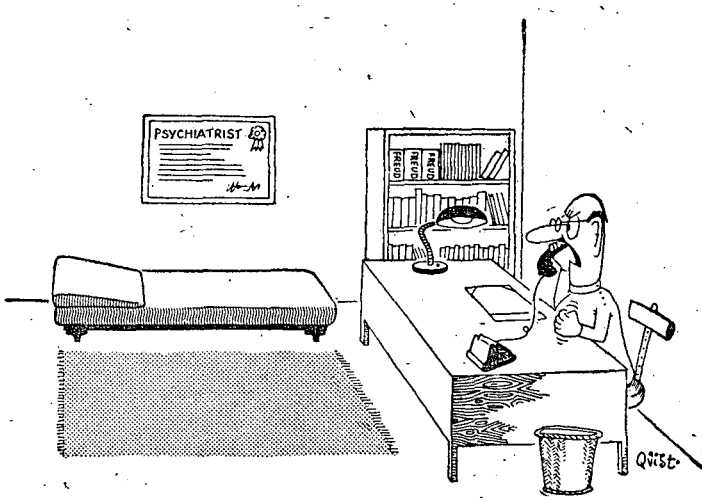

"It's my last warning, Smith: pay that bill, or I'll let you go crazy!"

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THE DANGEROUS PEOPLE

In the silence
the siren wailed again

BY FREDRIC BROWN

MR. BELLEFONTAINE shivered a little, standing there on the edge of the platform of the little railway station. The weather was cool enough, but it wasn't the cold that made him shiver. It was that distant siren sounding again. A far, faint wail in the night—the wail of a tortured fiend.

He'd heard it first half an hour before, while he'd been getting a haircut in the one-man barber's shop in the main street of this little one-horse town. And the barber had told him what it was.

"But that's five miles away," he said to himself. It didn't relieve his mind, though. A strong, desperate man could travel five miles in less than an hour, and maybe he'd escaped some time before they'd missed him. He must have. If they'd seen him go, they could probably have caught him.

Maybe, even, he'd escaped this afternoon, and had been free for hours. What time was it now? Not much after seven; and his train didn't get here until almost eight. It grew dark early these days.

Mr. Bellefontaine had walked a bit too rapidly from the barber's shop to the station, more rapidly than a man who suffers from heart trouble should. The steps up to the station platform had taken what little wind remained in him, and he had put down his briefcase to rest a moment before he crossed the platform to the waiting-room.

He was still breathing hard, but thought he could manage the rest of the way now and get in out of the darkness. He picked up the briefcase and was almost startled by its unaccustomed weight, until he remembered the revolver that was in it.

Odd for him, of all people, to be carrying a revolver—even one unloaded and wrapped in paper, with the box of cartridges for it wrapped separately and in the other compartment of the case. But Mr. Murgatroyd, the client he had come out here to

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see on legal business, had asked him as a personal favour to take the gun back to Milwaukee with him and give it to his, Mr. Murgatroyd's, brother to whom Mr. Murgatroyd had promised it.

"Awfully difficult thing to ship," Murgatroyd had said. "Wouldn't know how to send it, parcel post, or goods, or what. Might even be illegal to send one by post; I don't know."

"Couldn't be," Bellefontaine had told his client, "because they sell the things by post. Maybe, though, they have to be registered."

"Well," Murgatroyd had said, "you're going straight through to Milwaukee anyway, so it won't be any trouble, and you won't have to take it to him or anything. Just ring him up, and he'll come round to your office. As a matter of fact, I've already written to tell him that I've asked you to take it."

So there hadn't been any way out—without offending a client—and Mr. Bellefontaine had brought the pistol with him, little as he had cared to have such a thing in his possession.

Damn this heart trouble, he thought as he opened the door of the little waiting-room and stepped inside. And damn a small-town chemist that doesn't have anything for it in stock. Next time, I'll bring a few capsules with me . . . He blinked to get his eyes used to the light, and looked around.

There was only one man in the waiting-room besides himself, a tall man, shabbily dressed, and with bloodshot eyes. He'd been sitting with his head in his hands when Mr. Bellefontaine came in, but now he looked up and said, "Hullo."

"Hullo," said Mr. Bellefontaine tersely. "Getting—uh—colder out."

The clock on the wall over the ticket window said seven-ten. Forty-five minutes to wait. Through the ticket window he could see into the inner office of the station where the grey-haired station-clerk was pecking out something on an ancient typewriter at a table against the far wall. Mr. Bellefontaine didn't go to the ticket window; he already had his return ticket.

The tall man sat on one side of a potbellied little coal stove near the wall at the far end of the waiting-room. There was a comfortable-looking rocking-chair on the other side of the stove, but Mr. Bellefontaine didn't want to cross the room and sit there just yet.

He was still breathing hard from the effect of the brisk walk on his weak heart, and he wanted to get all his wind back first. He'd probably have to talk as soon as he sat down there, and if he had to talk in short jerky sentences he'd have to explain about his infirmity.

So, as an excuse for standing there a while, he turned round

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to stare out through the glass pane of the door, as though he were watching something outside.

He saw instead his own reflection in the pane. A chubby little man, pink-faced, and going bald, although that didn't show with his hat on. But his horn-rimmed glasses gave him a serious look, which fitted him well, for Mr. Bellefontaine took himself seriously. He was forty now, and by the time he was fifty he would be a very important corporation lawyer.

The siren wailed again.

Mr. Bellefontaine shivered slightly at the sound, and then went over and sat in the rocker by the coal stove. His briefcase thumped heavily on the floor as he put it down.

"Taking the seven-fifty-five?" the tall man asked.

Mr. Bellefontaine nodded. "Through to Milwaukee."

"I get off at Madison," said the tall man. "We've got a couple of hundred miles to travel together; might as well get acquainted. My name's Jones. Book-keeper for the Saxe Paint Company."

Mr. Bellefontaine introduced himself, then added, "Saxe Paint? I thought it was in Chicago."

"Branch office in Madison."

"Oh," said Mr. Bellefontaine. It was his turn to say something, but he couldn't think of anything to say. In the silence, the siren wailed again. It sounded louder this time, and he shivered.

"That thing gives me the willies," he said.

The tall man picked up the poker and opened the door of the stove. "Cold in here," he said, taking a poke at the fire. "Say, what is that siren?"

"Asylum for the Criminally Insane," he said. "An escape." Unconsciously he dropped his voice. "Probably a homicidal maniac. That's the kind they have in that place."

"Oh," said the tall man rather blankly. He poked harder at the fire, slammed the stove door shut and, still holding the poker, sat back down in his chair.

It was, Mr. Bellefontaine noticed, a very heavy poker for so small a stove. His long legs spread apart, the tall man swung it meditatively up and down between his knees. He watched the swinging poker instead of Mr. Bellefontaine's face. Suddenly he asked, "Is there a description out? Know what the maniac looks like?"

"Uh—no," said Mr. Bellefontaine. His eyes were suddenly caught by the arc of that heavy poker.

What if—he thought. He stopped himself abruptly. No, that was silly. Or was it? There was something—

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Suddenly he knew what it was. He'd thought the tall man was rather poorly dressed; now Mr. Bellefontaine realized, looking at him, that it wasn't that at all. The clothes were of good, at least average quality. But they didn't fit him.

That suit had been made for a man of medium height, and so had the overcoat. The turn-ups of the trousers were pulled down, although they'd been pressed to stay up, and still showed the fold of the pressing. That was why they hung so peculiarly about the ankles. They were still an inch or so too short; so were the sleeves of the overcoat and the jacket of the suit.

Mr. Bellefontaine sat very still, and pretended not to look; but out of the corner of his eye he continued his examination furtively. The tall man's shirt was undoubtedly too big round the collar. It had been made for a man with a much thicker neck. Jones' scrawny neck stuck up through it with wide clearance on all sides.

And his eyes, wild and bloodshot . . .

He would head for a railway, thought Mr. Bellefontaine. Some little station like this, a good distance from the asylum. On the way he'd burgle a house to get clothes in exchange for his uniform. Or maybe he'd even kill a man he met to get those clothes. And the clothes, of course, wouldn't fit him . . .

Mr. Bellefontaine sat very still. He could feel his face become cool as the colour drained from it. Of course, he could be wrong, but . . .

Jones, he thought. The very name a man would be likely to give if he hadn't thought about what name to use until he had to introduce himself. Saxe Paint Company, a big, widely-advertised firm, just the sort he'd think of first.

He had slipped there, on the Madison part, but covered up by saying it was a branch office.

And he didn't seem to have a suitcase. Only the clothes he was wearing, and they weren't his own. Stolen, and maybe he'd killed to get them! Killed a man only an hour ago or less. A short stocky man with a thick neck . . .

Slowly the poker swung up and down in that hypnotizing arc. Slowly the bloodshot eyes of the tall man swung up from it to Mr. Bellefontaine's face. He said, " Do you think—" Then his voice changed, " What's wrong? What's the matter? "

Mr. Bellefontaine gulped, then managed to say, " N-nothing."

The bloodshot eyes kept on looking at him for a long minute and then slowly dropped to the swinging poker. The tall man didn't go on with whatever he'd started to ask . . .

He knows, thought Mr. Bellefontaine dully. I gave myself away. He knows that I know who he is. If I try to walk out of

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here now, he'll know I'm going for the police. He can get me with that poker long before I reach the door.

He wouldn't even need the poker. He could strangle me. But no, he'll use the poker. The way he swings it and looks at it, he's thinking of it as a weapon.

But will he kill me anyway, even if I don't make a move? He might; he's mad. Madmen don't need reasons . . .

The inside of his mouth was very dry. His lips seemed stuck together, and Mr. Bellefontaine had to run his tongue between them before he could open his mouth to speak. He had to say something—something casual, to try to reassure the madman. Carefully he worked out each word, so that he wouldn't stumble or stutter.

He said, "Getting c-colder out." Only when he'd said it did he remember that he'd said the same thing once before. Well, people often repeat themselves.

The tall man looked at him, then looked down again. "Yes," he said. No inflection, nothing to show what he was thinking.

Suddenly Mr. Bellefontaine remembered the revolver. If only it were loaded and in his pocket, instead of being unloaded, wrapped up, and in the briefcase. How could he possibly—?

His eyes, darting about in frantic search, saw the door marked, *Men*. Could he make it? Would the killer stop him if he walked towards the door?

There were beads of perspiration on his forehead as he stood up slowly and took the briefcase. A shred of courage came back and he managed to make his voice almost calm as he said, "You'll excuse me a minute?" and walked round behind the stove and behind the chair the madman was occupying towards the door of the wash-room.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the tall man turned to watch him. But he wasn't getting up!

Mr. Bellefontaine closed the door of the wash-room quickly, and looked for a key in the lock. There wasn't one; nor was there a bolt. His hands trembled as he jerked the zipper on the briefcase. His eyes roamed about, but saw nothing helpful. No window he could get out of—just a tiny one up high in the wall, well out of reach. No way that he could barricade the door. There was a flimsy bolt on the door of the lavatory, but a man could shove that door open with one hand.

No, no safety here. All he could do was load the revolver and have it in his pocket ready when he went out again. And he couldn't stay too long. He must hurry . . . hurry . . .

Mr. Jones stared curiously for a moment at the closed door of

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the wash-room, then shrugged his shoulders and went back to fiddling with the poker.

What a goof that fellow was. Definitely off his rocker, that was obvious. He'd hoped he'd have someone to talk to on the train, but if *that* was the best company available . . . ! Well, he'd try to sleep on the train.

He could do with some sleep, after last night. You wouldn't expect a wild party like that, here in the back of beyond. But Madge, his sister, had been in the mood to celebrate, and so had Hank, his brother-in-law. The liquor had been bad, but plentiful. It had been an anniversary party all right.

What idiots those neighbours of theirs, the Wilkinses, had made of themselves.

But, Mr. Jones thought wryly, no more of an idiot than he had made of himself, staggering out into the barnyard for some fresh air and falling flat on his face in gooey mud. Lord, would his suit look the same again when it came back to him? Here he was having to wear some of Hank's clothes till he got back to Madison.

It would be a long time before he drank *that* much again. Fun at the time, but how terrible you felt the next day, even the next evening. Good thing he hadn't had to go to work today, with his eyes looking the way they did. The gang at the office would razz hell out of him.

Tomorrow—oh, damn Saxe paint and all book-keeping! He'd quit tomorrow if old Rogers, the branch manager, hadn't told him that in a few more months he'd be able to put him on the road. Selling wouldn't be so bad. And he did know paint, so it would be worth sticking to the books a couple of months more.

The door of the wash-room opened and the funny-looking little man came out. Mr. Jones glanced round, and—yes, he still had that crazy expression on his face. A sort of tightened-up, stiff look, as if his face was a mask glued on him.

He was walking oddly, too, as he came back—carrying that briefcase in his left hand this time, with his right hand stuck deep in his overcoat pocket.

What the devil had he taken the briefcase with him for, anyway? Surely he hadn't thought someone would run off with it in the few minutes he'd been in there. Unless, of course, he had something valuable in it, jewellery or something. No, too heavy for jewellery, the way it had thudded against the floor the first time he'd put it down. More like travellers' samples, except that salesmen didn't usually carry heavy goods in brown leather briefcases.

He watched curiously as the little man sat down in the chair

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again, without taking his hand out of his overcoat pocket, and again put the briefcase down on the floor. But this time it didn't thump. It looked and sounded lighter, as if it contained nothing, or only a few papers. As though there were nothing to weight it down, it fell over, and the little guy picked it up again and leaned it against the chair to keep it from falling. It was empty, or at least something heavy had been taken out of it.

Still idly curious, Mr. Jones looked up from the mysterious briefcase to the tense white face above it.

Was the fellow crazy? Really crazy?

Faintly, in the silence, came the wail of the siren. And at the sound the little man started; his face went slack with fear, and then froze again.

Mr. Jones' scalp prickled. Pretending not to have noticed, he looked down again quickly at the poker in his hand. His knuckles tightened about the handle of it as he realized that it was his only weapon against a homicidal maniac.

Lord, why hadn't he guessed it sooner?

The man had come in here panting and out of breath; he'd been running. He turned round and watched through the glass of the door to see if he'd been followed . . .

Then he'd acted rationally for a while. Madmen did; they had periods when you couldn't tell them at all from normal people . . .

A homicidal maniac, he thought. Does he intend to kill me? Is that why he's acting that way? Getting crazier every minute, working himself up to a kill?

But he's a small man. I ought to be able to handle him, although maniacs are supposed to be terribly strong. But I know how to use my fists a bit. Unless he's got a gun . . .

Suddenly, and beyond all doubt, Mr. Jones knew what had been in the briefcase, he knew why the madman had gone to the wash-room—to transfer that gun from the case to the right-hand pocket of the overcoat, where his hand was now gripped round it, his finger on the trigger.

Still pretending to look down at the poker, Mr. Jones glanced sideways out of the corner of his eye at the bulge in the overcoat pocket. A gun, all right. It was a much bigger bulge than just a hand would make. He could see the outline of the barrel making a little raised ridge towards the end of the pocket. A revolver, probably, with a five or six-inch barrel . . .

If he were an escaped maniac, he tried to tell himself, he wouldn't have told me what that siren was. But then, I asked him what it was. He might have thought I knew already, and suspected him because of the breathless way he made his

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entrance. So he had to tell the truth, in case I already knew. And that phoney name he gave—Bellefontaine—a name out of a book. Real people seldom have names like that.

But these were just arguments; the gun was a fact. You can't argue against a gun aimed at you by a homicidal maniac.

Why was he waiting?

From a long way off came the sound of a train whistle. Mr. Jones managed, without turning his head, to cast a glance at the clock. Fifteen minutes too soon for the passenger train, the seven-fifty-five; must be a goods train going through, probably in the opposite direction.

Yes, he could hear it coming now and it sounded like a goods train. It wasn't slowing down. He heard a door close in the other room of the station and guessed what it was. The station-clerk was going out on the platform. Yes, there were footsteps on the platform, and then the rumble of the coming train drowned them.

When the engine was directly opposite the station, right outside the window— Of course, *that* was what he was waiting for. The rush of deafening, roaring sound that would drown the sound of the shot.

Mr. Jones tensed, tightened his grip on the poker until his knuckles went dead white, and shifted his weight forward. He could make it in one step, raising the poker as he did so. If the muzzle of that pistol, outlined through the cloth of the madman's overcoat, started to lift.

Roar of the coming train, louder, nearer—a crescendo rushing roar of obliterating sound—louder, louder . . .

And as Mr. Jones leaned forward the muzzle of the gun *was* lifting.

The man in the blue uniform with the brass buttons closed the door carefully behind him and turned to the two men sitting on either side of the stove. They looked funny, sitting there in such awkward, strained attitudes, as if they were scared stiff.

Should he? No; it would be too dangerous. He had the uniform now, and it would be so easy to get on the train and make his getaway, far from the search zone. But it would be so damned easy to kill those fellows, with the gun holstered at his belt—a gun that the uniform gave him the right to wear openly and without fear.

He said, "Evening, gentlemen," and one of them mumbled something back; the other didn't answer at all.

The tall one who was playing with the poker asked, "Have they caught the—maniac?" and he glanced out of the corner

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of his eye at the little plump fellow, almost as though he were trying to signal something.

He laughed. "No, they haven't caught him yet," he said. "I don't think they will."

It was so funny, so excruciatingly funny. He said, "They'll have real trouble getting him now. He killed a policeman at Waynesville and stole his gun and uniform. And they don't even know it yet!"

He laughed again, and was still chuckling when he reached for the gun in his holster.

But the gun wasn't even out of the leather before a blasting, unexpected shot that seemed to come from inside the little man's pocket whizzed by his ear, and the tall man with the poker was already halfway across the room towards him. He hadn't even raised the gun before a second shot from the little man's pistol hit him in the upper arm and the poker was already smashing down at his head. He tried to duck and succeeded only in avoiding the full force of the tall man's blow.

The goods train was whistling far off when he came to. Someone was excitedly using the telephone in the station-master's side of the station building.

He was tied hand and foot. He struggled briefly, and then relaxed and sighed, looking up at the two men standing over him. He thought back.

Why, they'd been ready and looking for trouble when he'd walked in! The little one must already have had his hand on that pistol, and the big one had been swinging the poker, ready. People usually have to build up to making a sudden attack, but these guys had gone off like a charge of dynamite.

Lord, if there were people as dangerous as that running loose, he'd be safer back in the asylum where they'd take care of him. Why, they'd almost killed him. They must be crazy!

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Her eyes are green!
Oh oh, he says, I die of love.

JOHN THOMPSON, Jr.

Summer to a strange land
Is into exile gone,
The forest trees are bare
Of their gay song . . .
But upon love,
Love that itself is fire,
No power hath the cold,
For love's desire
Kindleth afresh that which was dead and old
In winter's hold.
I suffer, yea, I die,
Yet this mine agony
I count all bliss,
Since death is life again,
Upon her lips!

HELEN WADDELL, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*

Carried away

To meddle with Lady Barbara would mean risking utter ruin —professional, social, and financial. And he knew he could not trust himself where risks were concerned . . . Risk and danger lured him even while he knew he was a fool to expose himself . . . And then all these cold blooded considerations were swept away to nothing again in a white hot wave of passion as he thought of her, slim and lovely, understanding and sweet. He was trembling with passion, the hot blood running under his skin, and muddled images streamed through his mind in a fantastic panorama. He stood by the rail staring unseeing over the blue sea with its

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patches of golden weed, conscious of nothing save the riot in his own body and mind . . .

It was coincidence that Hornblower should come into the main cabin in the half light at a moment when he thought Lady Barbara was on deck, and it was coincidence that his hand should brush against her bare arm as they stood cramped between the table and the locker, and he apologized for his intrusion. She was in his arms then, and they kissed, and kissed again. She put one hand behind his shoulder and touched the back of his neck, and they were giddy with passion.

C. S. FORESTER, *The Happy Return*

Conflagration

Well may you tremble now, and say there was nothing meant,
And curl away from my care with a " Please, my dear,"
For though you were smoke, sucked up by a raging vent,
I'd follow you through every flue of your fear,
And over your faraway arms I'll mountain and cone
In a pillar of carolling fire and fountaining stone.

O strike the gong of your wrong, raise the roof of your rage
Fist and foist me off with a cloud of cries,
What do I care for all your footling rampage?
On your light-in-gale blows my larking caresses will rise,
But—Why so still? What! are you weeping, my sweet?
Ah heart, heart, look! I throw myself at your feet.

W. R. RODGERS, *Stormy Night*

Wild Woodbine

And then, drawing her aside, into the hedge, which was sweet with late honeysuckle, he had kissed her. Araminta had been dreadfully scared; not of the kiss, for she had kissed before and always got out of it, laughing or cross; no, this time she had been frightened of herself, by the wild feelings roused in her by the touch of his hands . . .

NORAH LOFTS, *To See a Fine Lady*

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She lost power either to breathe or see; she was only conscious of the darkness all round her head, of his kisses, and the long pressure of his hands.

For how long this lasted she had no idea; the first impression that marked her returning consciousness was that of the wide sky hanging over them; she gazed at it in silent fixity, and slowly made out a shape that was eluding her—the crown of a poplar-tree whose green and silver seemed to melt into the air, and only to be tangible close round the dark stem.

Her hands clung to his shoulders:

"If only I could die now, or be turned to stone!"

It was a thought; she did not realize she had whispered it until his low voice answered with the rallying, protesting note:

"You're so much nicer as you are! Think of my feelings if you turned to stone in my arms!"

ELIZABETH JENKINS,
Virginia Water

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
"Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free."
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
"The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue."
And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

A. E. HOUSMAN,
When I was One-and-Twenty

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SILVER-STRUNG GUITAR

She pointed with her pipe-stem
off into the empty dark

BY MANLY WADE WELLMAN

THE folks at the party clapped me such an encore, I sang that song.

The lady had stopped her car at the roadside when she saw my thumb out and my silver-strung guitar under my arm. Asked me my name, I told her John. Asked where I was headed, I told her nowhere special. Asked could I play that guitar, I played it as we rolled along. Then she invited me most kindly to her country house, to sing to her friends, and they'd be obliged, she said. And I went.

The people there were fired up with what they'd drunk, lots of ladies and men in costly clothes, and I had my bothers not getting drunk, too. But, shoo, they liked what I played and sang. Staying off worn-out songs, I smote out what they'd never heard before—*Witch in the Wilderness*, and *Rebel Soldier*, and *Vandy, Vandy, I've Come to Court You.* When they clapped and hollered for more, I sang the *Yandro Song*, like this:

I'll go build me a desrick on Yandro's high hill,
Where the wild beasts can't reach me or hear my sad cry,
For he's gone, he's gone away, for to stay a little while,
But he's comin' back if he goes ten thousand miles.

Then they strung around and made me more welcome than any stranger could call for, and the hostess lady said I must stay to supper, and sleep there that night. But at that second, everybody sort of pulled away, and one man came up and sat down by me.

I'd been aware that, when first he came in, things stilled down, like with little boys when a big bully shows himself. He was built short and broad, his clothes were sporty, cut handsome and costly. His buckskin hair was combed across his head to baffle folks he wasn't getting bald. His round, pink face wasn't soft, and his big, smiling teeth reminded you there was a bony skull

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under that meat. His pale eyes, like two gravel bits, prodded me and made me remember I needed a haircut and a shine.

"You said Yandro, young man," said this fellow. He said it almost like a charge in court, with me the prisoner.

"Yes, sir. The song's mountainy, not too far from the Smokies. I heard it in a valley, and the highest peak over that valley's called Yandro. Now," I said, "I've had scholarmen argue me it really means yonder—yonder high hill. But the peak's called Yandro. Not a usual name."

"No, John." He smiled toothy and fierce. "Not a usual name. I'm like the peak. I'm called Yandro, too."

"How you, Mr. Yandro?" I said.

"I never heard of that peak or valley, nor, I imagine, did my father before me. But my grandfather—Joris Yandro—came from the Southern mountains. He was young, with small education, but lots of energy and ambition." Mr. Yandro swelled up inside his fancy clothes. "He went to New York, then Chicago. His fortunes prospered. His son—my father—and then I, we contrived to make them prosper still more."

"You're to be honoured," I said, my politest; but I judged, with no reason to be sure, that he might not be too honourable about how he made his money, or used it. The way the others drew from him made me reckon he scared them, and that kind of folks scares worst where their money-pocket's located.

"I've done all right," he said, not caring who heard the brag. "I don't think anybody for a hundred miles around here can turn a deal or make a promise without clearing it with me. John, I own this part of the world."

Again he showed his teeth. "You're the first one ever to tell me about where my grandfather might have come from. Yandro's high hill, eh? How do we get there, John?"

I tried to think of the way from highway to side way, side way to trail, and so in and around and over. "I fear," I said, "I could show you better than I could tell you."

"All right, you'll show me," he said, with no notion I might want something different. "I can afford to make up my mind on a moment's notice like that. I'll call the airport and charter a plane. We leave now."

"I asked John to stay tonight," said my hostess lady.

"We leave now," said Mr. Yandro, and she shut right up, and I saw how it was. Everybody was scared of him. Maybe they'd be pleasured if I took him out of there for a while.

"Get your plane," I said. "We leave now."

He meant that thing. Not many hours had died before the

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hired plane set us down at the airport between Asheville and Hendersonville. A taxi rode us into Hendersonville. Mr. Yandro woke up a used-car man and bought a car from him. Then, on my guiding, Mr. Yandro drove off into the dark for that part of the mountains I pointed out to him.

The sky stretched over us with no moon at all, only a many stars, like little stitches of blazing thread in a black quilt. For real light, only our headlamps—first on a paved road twining round one slope and over another and behind a third, then a gravel road and pretty good, then a dirt road and pretty bad.

"What a stinking country!" said Mr. Yandro, as we chugged along a ridge as thin as a butcher's knife.

I didn't say how I resented that word about a country that stoops to none for prettiness. "Maybe we ought to have waited till day," I said.

"I never wait," he sniffed. "Where's the town?"

"No town. Just the valley. Three—four hours away. We'll be there by midnight."

"Let's have some of that whisky I brought." He reached for the glove compartment, but I shoved his hand away.

"Not if you're going to drive on these mountain roads, Mr. Yandro."

"Then you drive a while, and I'll take a drink."

"I don't know how to drive a car, Mr. Yandro."

"Oh," he said, and couldn't have scorned me more if I'd said I didn't know how to wash my face. "What is a desrick, exactly?"

"Only old-aged folks use the word any more. It's the kind of cabin they used to make, strong logs and a door you can bar, and loophole windows. So you could stave off Indians, maybe."

"Or the wild beasts can't reach you," he quoted, and sneered. "What wild beasts do they have up here in the Forgotten Latitudes?"

"Can't rightly say. A few bears, a wildcat or two. Used to be wolves, and a bounty for killing them. I'm not sure what else."

True enough, I wasn't sure about the tales I'd heard. Not anyway when Mr. Yandro was ready to sneer at them for foolishment.

Our narrow road climbed a great slant of rock one way then doubled back to climb opposite, and became a double rut, with an empty, hell-scary drop of thousands of feet beside the car. Finally Mr. Yandro edged us into a sort of crevice in the rock at the side of the road, and shut off the power. He shook. Fear must have been a new feel in his bones.

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"Want some of the whisky, John?" he asked, and drank.

"Thank you, no. We walk from here, anyway. Beyond's the valley."

He grumped and mad-whispered, but out he got. I took a flashlight and my silver-strung guitar and led out. It was a downways walk, on a narrow trail where even mules would be nervous— And not quiet enough to be easy.

There were mountain night-noises, like you never get used to, not even if you're born and raised there, and live and die there.

Noises too soft and sneaky to be real murmuring voices. Noises like big flapping wings far off and then near.

And, above and below the trail, there were noises like heavy soft paws keeping pace with you, sometimes two paws, sometimes four, sometimes many.

They stay with you, noises like that, all the hours you grope along the night trail, all the way down to the valley so low, till you bless God for the little crumb of light that means a human home, and you ache and pray to get to that home, be it ever so humble, so you'll be safe in the light.

I've wondered since if Mr. Yandro's constant blubber and chatter was a string of curses or a string of prayers.

The light we saw was a pine-knot fire inside a little cabin above the stream that giggled in the valley bottom. The door was open, and someone sat on the threshold.

"Is that a desrick?" panted and puffed Mr. Yandro.

"No, it's newer made. There's Miss Tully at the door, sitting up to think."

Miss Tully remembered me and welcomed us.

She was eighty or ninety, without a tooth in her mouth to clamp her stone-bowl pipe, but she stood straight as a pine on the split-slab floor, and the firelight showed no grey in her tight-combed black hair.

"Rest your hats," said Miss Tully. "So this stranger man's name is Mr. Yandro. Funny, you coming just now. You're looking for the desrick on Yandro, it's still right where it's been," and she pointed with her pipe-stem off into the empty dark across the valley and up.

Inside, she gave us two chairs bottomed with juniper bark and sat on a stool next to the shelf with herbs in pots, and one or two old paper books, *The Long Lost Friend*, and *Egyptian Secrets*, and *Big Albert*, the one they say can't be thrown away or given away, only got rid of by burying with a funeral prayer, like a human corpse.

"Funny," she said again, "you coming along as the seventy-five years are up."

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We questioned, and she told us what we'd come to hear. "I was just a little pigtail girl back then," she said, "when Joris Yandro courted Polly Wiltse, the witch girl. Mr. Yandro, you favour your grandsire a right much. He wasn't as stout-built as you, and younger by years, when he left . . ."

Even the second time hearing it, I listened hard. It was like a many such tale at the start. Polly Wiltse was sure enough a witch, not just a study-witch like Miss Tully, and Polly Wiltse's beauty would melt the heart of nature and make a dumb man cry out, "Praise God who made her!"

But none dared court her save only Joris Yandro, who was handsome for a man, like she was lovely for a girl. For it was his wish to get her to show him the gold on top of the mountain that was called after his folks, that only Polly Wiltse and her witching could find.

"Certain sure there's gold in these mountains," I answered Mr. Yandro's interrupting question. "Before ever the California rush started, folks mined and minted gold in these parts, the history-men say."

"Gold," he repeated, both respectful and greedy. "I was right to come."

Miss Tully said that Joris Yandro coaxed Polly Wiltse to bring down gold to him, and he carried it away and never came back. And Polly Wiltse pined and mourned like a sick bird, and on Yandro's top she built her desrick. She sang the *Yandro Song*, the one I'd sung; it was part of a long spell and charm. Three-quarters of a century would pass, seventy-five years, and her lover would come back.

"But he didn't," said Mr. Yandro. "My grandfather died up north."

"He sent his grandson, who favours him," said Miss Tully. "The song you heard brought you back at the right time." She thumbed tobacco into her pipe. "All the Yandro kin moved away, all pure down scared of Polly Wiltse's singing."

"In her desrick, where the wild beasts can't reach her," quoted Mr. Yandro, and chuckled. "John says they have bears and wildcats up here."

He expected her to say I was stretching it.

"Oh, there's other creatures, too. Scarce animals, like the Toller."

"The Toller?" he said.

"It's the hugest flying thing there is, I guess," said Miss Tully. "Its voice tolls like a bell, to tell other creatures their feed's near. And there's the Flat. It lies level with the ground,

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and not much higher. It can wrap you like a blanket." She lighted the pipe. "And the Bammat. Big, the Bammat is."

"The Behemoth, you mean," he suggested.

"No, the Behemoth's in the Bible. The Bammat's something hairy-like, with big ears, and a long wiggly nose and twisty white teeth sticking out of its mouth—"

"Oh!" And Mr. Yandro trumpeted his laughter. "You've got some story about the Mammoth. Why, they've been extinct—dead and forgotten—for thousands of years."

"Not for so long, I've heard tell," she said, puffing.

"Anyway," he went on arguing, "the Mammoth—the Bammat, as you call it—is of the elephant family. How would anything like that get up in the mountains?"

"Maybe folks hunted it there," said Miss Tully, "and maybe it stays there so folks will think it's dead and gone a thousand years. And there's the Behinder."

"And what," said Mr. Yandro, "might the Behinder look like?"

"Can't rightly say, Mr. Yandro. For it's always behind the man or woman it wants to grab. And there's the Skim—it kites through the air—and the Culverin, that can shoot pebbles with its mouth."

"And you believe all that?" sneered Mr. Yandro, the way he always sneered at everything, everywhere.

"Why else should I tell it?" she replied. "Well, sir, you're back where your kin used to live, in the valley where they named the mountain after them. I can let you two sleep on my front stoop tonight."

"I came to climb the mountain and see the desrick," said Mr. Yandro with that anxious hurry to him that I kept wondering about.

"You can't climb up there until it's light," she told him, and made us two quilt pallets on the split-slab stoop.

I was tired and glad to stretch out, but Mr. Yandro grumbled, as if we were wasting time.

At sun-up next morning, Miss Tully fried us some side meat and slices of hominy grit porridge, and she fixed us a snack to carry, and a gourd to put water in. Mr. Yandro held out a ten-dollar bill.

"No, I thank you," said Miss Tully. "I bade you stay, and I won't take money for that."

"Oh, everybody takes money from me," he snickered, and threw it on the doorstep at her feet. "Go on, it's yours."

Quick as a weasel, Miss Tully's hand grabbed a stick of stove wood.

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" Lean down and take back that money, mister," she said.

He did as she told him.

With the stick she pointed out across the stream that ran through the thickets below us, and up the height beyond. She acted as if there wasn't any trouble a second before.

" That's the Yandro Mountain," she said. " There, on the highest point, where it looks like the crown of a hat, thick with trees all the way up, stands the desrick built by Polly Wiltse. You look close, with the sun rising, and you can make it out."

I looked hard. There for sure it was, far off and high up, and tiny, but I could see it. It looked a lean sort of a building.

" How about trails going up? " I asked her.

" There's trails up there, John, but nobody walks them."

" Now, now," said Mr. Yandro, " if there's a trail, somebody must walk it."

" May be a lot in what you say, but I know nobody in this valley would set foot to such a trail. Not with what they say is up there."

He laughed at her, as I wouldn't have dared. " You mean the Bammat," he said. " And the Flat, and the Skim, and the Culverin."

" And the Toller," she added for him. " And the Behinder. Only a gone gump would go up there."

We headed away down to the waterside, and crossed on logs laid on top of rocks. On the far side a trail led along, and when the sun was an hour higher we were at the foot of Yandro's high hill, and a trail went up there, too.

We rested. Mr. Yandro needed rest worse than I did. Moving most of the night before, unused to walking and climbing, he had a gaunt look to his heavy face, and his clothes were sweated, and dust dulled out his shoes. But he grinned at me.

" So she's waited seventy-five years," he said, " and so I look like the man she's waiting for. And so there's gold up there. More gold than my grandfather could have carried off."

" You believe what you've been hearing," I said, and it was a mystery.

" John, a wise man knows when to believe the unusual, and how it will profit him. She's up there, waiting, and so is the gold."

" What when you find it? " I asked.

" My grandfather was able to go off and leave her. It sounds like a good example to me." He grinned wider and toothier. " I'll give you part of the gold."

" No thanks, Mr. Yandro."

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"You don't want your pay? Why did you come here with me?"

"Just made up my mind at a moment's notice like you."

He scowled then, but he looked up at the height. "How long will it take to climb, John?"

"Depends on how fast we climb, how well we keep up the pace."

"Then let's go," and he started up the trail.

It wasn't folks' feet had worn that trail. I saw a hoofmark.

"Deer," grunted Mr. Yandro; and I said, "Maybe."

We scrambled up on a rightward slant, then leftward. The trees marched in close around us, with branches above that filtered only soft green light. Something rustled, and we saw a brown, furry shape, big as a big cat, scuttling out of sight.

"Woodchuck," wheezed Mr. Yandro; again I said, "Maybe."

After an hour's working upward we rested, and after two hours more we rested again. Around eleven o'clock we reached an open space where clear light touched the middle, and there we sat on a log and ate the corn bread and smoked meat Miss Tully had put up for us.

Mr. Yandro mopped his face with a fancy handkerchief, and gobbled food for strength to glitter his eye at me.

"What are you glooming about?" he said. "You look as if you'd call me a name if you weren't afraid."

"I've held my tongue," I said, "from manners, not fear. I'm just thinking about how and why we came so far and sudden to this place."

"You sang me a song, and I heard, and thought I'd come to where my people originated. Now I have a hunch about profit. That's enough for you."

"It's not just that gold story," I said. "You're more than rich enough."

"I'm going up there," said Mr. Yandro, "because that old hag down there said everybody's afraid to do it. And you said you'd go with me."

"I'll go right to the top with you," I said.

I forbore to say that something had come close and looked from among the trees behind him.

It was big and broad-headed, with elephant ears to right and left, and white tusks like banisters on a spiral staircase. But it was woolly-shaggy, like a buffalo bull. The Bammat.

How could such a thing move so quiet-like?

He drank from his whisky bottle, and on we climbed. We could hear those noises in the woods and brush, behind rocks and down little gullies, as if the mountainside thronged with living

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things as thick as fleas on a possum dog, and a darned sight creepier. I didn't let on that I was very nervous.

"Why are you singing under your breath?" he grunted.

"I'm not singing," I said. "I need my breath for climbing."

"I hear you!" he charged me, like a lawyer in court.

We'd stopped dead on the trail, and I heard it, too.

It was soft, almost like some half-remembered song in your mind. It was the *Yandro Song*, all right:

Look away, look away, look away over Yandro,
On Yandro's high hill where them wild things are flyin'
From bough to bough, and a-matin' with their mates,
So why not me with mine?

"That singing comes from up above us," I said.

"Then," he said, "we must be nearly at the top."

As we started climbing again, I could hear the noises to right and left in the woods, and then I realized they'd quietened down when we stopped. They moved when we moved, they waited when we waited. There were lots of them. Soft noises, but lots of them.

Which is why I myself, and probably Mr. Yandro too, didn't pause any more on the way up, even on a rocky stretch where we had to climb on all fours. It may have been an hour after noon when we came to the top.

Right there was a circle-shaped clearing, with the trees thronged around it all the way except for an open space towards the slope. Those trees had mist among and between them, quiet and fluffy, like cobwebbing. And at the open space, on the lip of the way down, perched the desrick.

Old-aged was what it looked. It stood high and looked the higher, because it was built so narrow of unnotched logs, set four above four, hogpen fashion, as tall as a tall tobacco barn. The spaces between the logs were chinked shut with great masses and wads of clay. The steep-pitched roof was of shingles, cut long and narrow, so that they looked almost like thatch. There was one big door, made of an axe-chopped plank, and the hinges must have been inside, for I could see none. And one window, covered with what must have been rawhide scraped thin, with a glow of soft light coming through.

"That's it," puffed Mr. Yandro. "The desrick."

I looked at him then, and knew what most he wanted on this earth. He wanted to be boss. Money was just something to greaten him. His idea of greatness was bigness. He wanted to do all the talking, and have everybody else do the listening. He

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had his eyes hung on that desrick, and he licked his lips, like a cat over a dish of cream.

"Let's go in," he said.

"Not where I'm not invited," I told him, as flatly as anybody could ever tell him. "I said I'd come to the top. This is the top."

"Come with me," he said. "My name's Yandro. This mountain's name is Yandro. I can buy and sell every man, woman, and child in this part of the country. If I say it's all right to go into a house, it's all right to go into a house."

He meant that thing. The world and everybody in it was just there to let him walk on. He took a step towards the desrick. Somebody hummed inside, not the words of the song, but the tune. Mr. Yandro snorted at me, to show how small he reckoned me because I held back, and he headed towards the big door.

"If she's there, she'll show me the gold," he said.

But I couldn't have moved from where I stood at the edge of the clearing. I was aware of a sort of closing in all around the edge, among the trees and brushy clumps. Not that the closing in could be seen, but there was a *gong-gong* farther off, the voice of the Toller norating to the other creatures their feed was near.

And above the treetops sailed a round, flat thing, like a big plate being pitched high. A Skim. Then another Skim. And the blood inside my body was cold and solid as ice, and my voice turned to a handful of sand in my throat.

I knew, plain as paint, that if I tried to back up, to turn round even, my legs would fail and I'd fall down. With fingers like twigs with sleet stuck to them, I dragged round my guitar, to pluck at the silver strings, because silver is protection against evil.

But I didn't.

For out of the bushes near me the Bammat stuck its broad woolly head, and it shook that head at me once, for silence. It looked me between the eyes, steadier than a beast should look at a man, and shook its head.

I wasn't to make any noise. And I didn't.

When the Bammat saw that I'd be quiet, it took no more heed of me, and I knew I wasn't to be included in what would happen next.

Mr. Yandro was knocking at the axe-chopped door. He waited, and knocked again. I heard him growl, something about how he wasn't used to waiting for people to answer his knock.

Inside, the humming had died out.

After a moment, Mr. Yandro moved round to where the window was, and picked at the rawhide.

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I could see, but he couldn't, as round from behind the corner of the desrick flowed something. It lay out on the ground like a broad, black, short-furred carpet rug. But it moved, humping and then flattening out, the way a measuring worm moves. It moved pretty fast, right towards Mr. Yandro from behind and to one side.

The Toller said *gong-gong-gong*, from closer in.

"Anybody in there?" bawled Mr. Yandro. "Let me in!"

The crawling carpet brushed its edge against his foot. He looked down at it, and his eyes stuck out all of a sudden, like two door-knobs. He knew what it was, and named it at the top of his voice.

"The Flat!"

Humping against him, it tried to wrap round his foot and leg. He gasped out something I'd never want written down for my last words, and pulled loose and ran, fast and straight, towards the edge of the clearing.

Gong-gong, said the Toller, and Mr. Yandro tried to slip along next to the trees. But, just ahead of him, the Culverin hoved itself half into sight on its many legs. It pointed its needle-shaped mouth and spat a pebble. I heard the pebble ring on Mr. Yandro's head.

He staggered against a tree. And I saw what nobody's ever supposed to see.

The Behinder flung itself on his shoulders. Then I knew why nobody's supposed to see one.

I wish I hadn't.

To this day I can see it, as plain as a fence at noon, and for ever I will be able to see it. But talking about it's another matter. Thank you, I won't try.

Then everything else was out—the Bammat, the Culverin, and all the others. They were hustling him across towards the desrick, and the door moved slowly and quietly open for him to come in.

As for me, I was out of their minds, and I hoped and prayed they wouldn't care if I just went on down the trail as fast as I could set one foot below the other.

Scrambling and scrambling down, without a noise to keep me company, I figured that I'd probably had my unguessed part in the whole thing. Seventy-five years had to pass, and then Mr. Yandro come there to the desrick.

And it needed me, or somebody like me, to meet him and sing the song that would put it in his head and heart to come to where his grand-daddy had courted Polly Wiltse, just as though it was his own whim.

No. No, of course, he wasn't the man who had made Polly

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Wiltse love him and then had left her. But he was the man's grandson, of the same blood and the same common, lowdown, sorry nature that wanted money and power, and didn't care who he hurt so he could have both. And he looked like Joris Yandro. Polly Wiltse would recognize him.

I haven't studied much about what Polly Wiltse was like, welcoming him into the desrick on Yandro, after waiting inside for three-quarters of a century. Anyway, I never heard of him following me down.

Maybe he's been missed. But I'll lay you anything you name he's not been mourned.

YANDRO SONG

I'm going away for to stay a little while
But I'm comin' back if I go ten thousand miles.
Oh, who will tie your shoes?
And who will glove your hands?
And who will kiss your ruby lips when I am gone?

Oh, it's pappy'll tie my shoes
And mammy'll glove my hands
And you will kiss my ruby lips when you come back!
For he's gone, oh he's gone away
For to stay a little while
But he's comin' back
If he goes ten thousand miles.

Look away, look away, look away over Yandro,
On Yandro's high hill, where them wild things are flyin'
From bough to bough and a-matin' with their mates,
So why not me with mine?
For he's gone, oh he's gone away
For to stay a little while
But he's comin' back
If he goes ten thousand miles.

I'll go build me a desrick on Yandro's high hill,
Where the wild beasts won't bother me nor hear my sad cry;
For he's gone, he's gone away
For to stay a little while,
But he's comin' back
If he goes ten thousand miles.

Folk Song from North Carolina

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PREMIUM FOR MURDER

Women hate anything violent

BY MIGNON G. EBERHART

THERE was a letter in the midday post, but it was not from the lawyer. A fortnight had gone by since Eunice's death and the inquest which brought a verdict of suicide. Roger had written to the lawyer as soon as the inquest was over. And there was still no answer.

With a flick of irritation Roger dropped the letter on the desk; he knew Sally Blake's handwriting. Soon she would stop writing to him. It had been a holiday romance, three weeks at a winter resort—during which Eunice had believed him to be negotiating for a new job as assistant manager of a hotel company.

There was nothing to do but wait for the next day's post.

He was getting short of money, and until the formalities were over he could not touch the cash balance that had shown in the only bank statement of Eunice's that he had been able to find. She had been as chary of keeping letters as a woman with a secret. She said she always sent her bank statements straight to her tax accountant. There hadn't even been old cheque books; only a small new one with a few stubs showing cheques for the rent of the cottage, the milkman, the electricity. But the last bank statement was in a dresser drawer, and it showed a small credit balance.

He counted the money in his pocket, went out, and treated himself to a rather expensive lunch.

When he returned, a man was waiting in the entrance hall of the shabby, down-at-heel block of flats which Eunice Ledyard, his rich wife, had obstinately chosen—and where he had contrived to stay with her as little as possible. The hall porter pointed out the visitor. "A gentleman waiting to see you, Mr. Ledyard."

The lawyer at last. Roger Ledyard lowered his eyelids, suppressing the leap of exultation within him. He turned, with suitably sober mien, to meet the man advancing towards him.

He was a startlingly young man, stocky, yet lean and

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hard-looking; he had his hand out. "Roger? I am Bill Shay. Eunice's brother."

Roger's stupefaction and disappointment were so great that he could not speak.

The young man had remarkably direct blue eyes. He said, "I only got back from Germany today. I'm out of the service now. I was sorry I couldn't get here for the funeral." He put a hard hand on Roger's wrist. "I ought to have phoned to you. You're as white as a ghost. Look here—can't we go to your flat to talk?"

Roger pulled himself together with an effort and led the way to the lift and to the poky, dismal flat.

Bill Shay removed his overcoat and dropped it on a chair.

"I wanted to see you. But I ought not to have barged in like this. It's been a shock to you. Poor old Eunice. It was too bad she had to go like that. When she was so happy, too. She wrote to me, you know, when you were married and—after that. Not often. But you made her very happy. I wanted to tell you that. Her first husband was twenty years older than Eunice. A cranky old bird."

And a very wealthy old bird, Roger thought; that's where Eunice got all her money.

Bill went on, "What I'm trying to say is, she was really in love with you. That—" there was a youthful diffidence in his manner—"that must be a comfort to you."

Roger had to say something. He said, "Dear Eunice."

"I'm your brother-in-law, you know. If there's anything I can do—"

"Nothing, thank you. It's kind of you to come to see me."

"Well, I—" He was looking at his coat; he had fulfilled his family obligation.

Roger said, "Thank you. I do—blame myself, you know. One does."

Bill sat back firmly again. "That's another thing I wanted to say, but I didn't want to bring it up. You shouldn't blame yourself because she—she killed herself. You made her very happy."

"I was here, you know. She was in the country. A furnished cottage. We took it to get her out of the city, really. Rest her heart."

"She told me. Her letters always told me about the kind things you did for her, and said how happy she was. To tell you the truth, her—her death did surprise me for that very reason."

"There's something—I didn't intend to tell you," Roger said. "Eunice was drinking."

"When did she begin?"

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" I don't know. It was hard to tell. She kept bottles hidden. I tried to do what I could but . . ."

Presently Bill said, " I'm sorry to hear about that. Eunice had rather a tough time, you know. Our parents died when Eunice was nineteen, I was ten years younger. She worked. I got a job in an aircraft factory as soon as I left school; I'll go back to it, now I've done my Army stint. Then she met Charles Worthy and married him. But when he died, Eunice knew she was on her own again. Perhaps that's when she started drinking."

He looked at the murky rug for a long time. Then he raised his head. " But you gave her the happiest two years of her life. That's all I wanted to say."

He was leaving now. Roger said, " Thank you for coming to see me." He made an effort to be friendly. He added, " Eunice's will hasn't been proved yet. I don't know anything about it, but I'm sure she must have left something to you."

He stopped because young Bill Shay was staring at him with frank amazement. " Eunice had nothing to leave anybody! Oh, maybe a few hundred dollars. Unless she managed to save much more of what her first husband allowed her than I think she did. When he died, he left her a certain income for life, but she didn't get his money."

An extraordinary, choking band fastened itself round Roger Ledyard's throat, which was in its way fortunate, for Bill went on talking.

" He was an oil magnate—" Roger said, before he could stop himself.

" He left his money in his own family," Bill said. " Eunice was a bit hurt about that. Too proud to let you or anyone guess he'd left her only a life income, just enough—and no more." Bill got into his overcoat. " She was overdrawn soon after he died, ran through her money in a few months. I had encouraged her to spend it. ' Give yourself a good time,' I said. ' Go away for a bit, take a suite in a luxury hotel. Get some smart clothes. Take a few weeks out of life. Maybe you will find yourself a husband.' And I was right." He gave Roger a fleeting, boyish grin. " She found you. So it was worth it to her."

A curious reddish mist was rising in the room. Through it Roger was barely aware of Bill's farewell. The door closed. Roger did not even hear the bumbling thud of the lift.

After a time he went to the telephone.

He knew the name of Eunice's lawyer. Eunice had told Roger that she had made a will leaving everything she had to him.

At the end of an hour with her lawyer, he knew that Bill had told him the truth.

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The liar! How cleverly she had deceived him, taking the best suite in the hotel where they met, wearing fine clothes, throwing her money around like water. A rich widow!

She wouldn't have caught him so easily if he hadn't been on the verge of being fired again . . . for nothing really, only a little petty cash he had borrowed.

He had thought her miserly and secretive. She deserved to die as she had died!

But what was he to do?

The room, on a courtyard and always dismal, was growing dusky. The envelope on the desk stood out sharply white. He opened the letter absently, thinking in some odd layer of his mind, Sally Blake's no use to me; she's got nothing but her job; why did I make love to her? Because she was pretty; because she happened to be staying in the same place, because he had nothing else to do. Why did women always take him seriously? His looks? His way with women? He glanced at the letter, but after the first few words he read it with close attention.

Dear Roger, I didn't know you were married. You didn't tell me. Of course I knew there was some reason why you didn't write to me, but I thought—I've moved to a new flat with another girl—I thought there was some confusion about my new address, or something.

So I finally went to the flats and the hall porter told me you might be at your cottage in the country and where it was, and—Roger, I drove up there. I thought—I only intended to see you, to make sure—I don't know what. Eunice was there. She guessed right away. I suppose because I was so surprised. She said she'd never give you up. She—oh, Roger, I didn't mean to. I'm so terribly sorry. I can never, never forgive myself. Roger, I'll never see you again. We can't after that.

Good-bye, Roger, for always.

It was signed, *Sally*. There was a postcript.

This sounds hysterical. But you will understand.

It was hysterical, Roger Ledyard thought remotely, as if it had nothing to do with him. Sally was very young. It was in a way an ambiguous letter, but he understood it. Then he thought, with a queer jolt, when was Sally at the cottage?

Obviously it was after he had seen Eunice for the last time, otherwise Eunice would have told him. So it was that afternoon after he had left Eunice and started the drive back to town. It would have been curious if Eunice had offered Sally a drink. The macabre humour of this situation struck him. He was

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smiling when someone knocked on the door. The gentle knock startled Roger. From some instinct of concealment he dropped Sally's childish scrawl into the waste-paper basket.

A mirror hung beside the door, and Roger saw himself in it with surprise. When had he disarranged his collar and tie like that? He adjusted both quickly, whipped out a pocket comb, and made his glossy hair smooth. He then opened the door.

A thin, grey man stood outside: grey overcoat, grey hat, grey hair, grey eyes. He said, " Mr. Ledyard? My name is Manson. May I come in? "

Once in the shabby sitting-room he would not remove his coat; he sat on the edge of a chair. " I wanted to see you myself, Mr. Ledyard. About your wife's life insurance. I am sorry."

A flaming eagerness swept Roger. He put his hand over his eyes and murmured, " Thank you. It was a shock . . ."

" Well, but—I mean, I'm sorry about your wife but—you see, I was the one who sold your wife her policy. So I felt it my duty to tell you myself."

Drums seemed to beat in Roger's ears, thudding, how much? how much? " I did not know my wife had an insurance policy. You surprise me."

" She didn't want you to know. She told me that. Her very words were, ' I want to make it up to him somehow if something should happen to me.' The phrase impressed me. She meant something to comfort you, to show her thought for you. I am sorry," the thin, grey man sighed. " It was for fifty thousand dollars. We—the company—we don't like this sort of thing. It happens very rarely but there is the law."

Roger took his hand from his eyes. " The law? "

" Yes. You see she took out the policy almost exactly eighteen months ago. Of course her heart was quite all right then. Otherwise she couldn't have passed the required physical examination. I suppose the—er—heart weakness and—and the drinking," he said in an apologetic parenthesis, " I had to talk to the doctor, you know—developed later. But she did commit suicide, Mr. Ledyard. So, according to law—"

" What are you saying? "

The little man said firmly, " She committed suicide within two years of taking out her life insurance policy and therefore we are not liable."

" You mean you are not going to pay? "

" No, Mr. Ledyard." The little man was at the door. " Perhaps in your wife's—confused state of mind she forgot. But that's the law. I do regret it." He was gentle again, but easing himself out of a difficult situation; his hand on the doorknob.

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" Now if it had been a case of accident. Or a case of—" he gave a deprecatory, small laugh— " or a case even of murder, there'd be no question. We'd pay. That is, not to the murderer, of course, but you didn't—I mean—" He extricated himself from unexpectedly deep waters and said firmly, " But suicide, no. That's the law."

He went away, still saying he was sorry. The red-tinged mist had returned, almost stifling Roger.

There must be a way out . . . Fifty thousand dollars!

But the fact was that Eunice's murder had been successful; so successful that there was no possible way to prove it was murder. And besides, even if he could prove it was murder it would prove at the same time that he had murdered her . . .

The windows were darker when gradually a kind of vision seemed to emerge from the fogginess about him. When it was finally clear—so clear, so easy, so simple to achieve—he got Sally's letter out of the waste-paper basket and read it again. Then he lifted the telephone. He knew the name of the importing firm where Sally worked; it was not quite five o'clock; she'd still be there. She was. He heard her quick breath. " Roger—"

He cut her off; the less said over the telephone the better. " Sally, I got your letter. I do understand. We'll talk of it later. But just now there's something I want you to do for me."

" I—what is it? "

" I have to go up to the cottage for some—some papers there. I dread going alone. Will you go with me? Just to help me over a hard spot. I thought if you could pick me up in your car when you leave the office—"

He waited until she said in a low hesitant voice, " Why, I . . . Yes, if you need—"

" I do need you. Very much." He wouldn't let her pick him up at the flat; the hall porter or someone might see her. " I'll be at the corner of the avenue at five. I'll be waiting for you." He hung up quickly.

His preparations to frame Sally Blake for murder were as simple as his preparations to murder Eunice had been. His gloves were still in his overcoat pocket; he put Sally's letter there, too. He went to the medicine chest, and found the second bottle of digitalis that Eunice had insisted upon leaving in town so that she'd always have a supply of the drops which the old, and old-fashioned, village doctor had prescribed.

At five o'clock he was waiting for her, his hat at a debonair angle. He shivered a little in spite of his overcoat.

It was still light, much lighter on the street than in his shadowed

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flat. He saw the small black car coming and went out to meet it. Sally stopped and he got in. The traffic light was still green; the car was in motion at once, and he took a quick look at Sally.

He'd forgotten how pretty she was. Her light hair waved and curved around her small head. She kept her dark eyes steadily on the traffic ahead. She was half frightened, he could see that, but half moved by his need for her. She was very direct, he reminded himself, very gullible, and very young. There were two questions he had to ask. He knew the answer to the first one, but he'd make sure.

He said, " I was surprised by your letter, Sally. When did you go to the cottage? "

She frowned in a troubled way. " The afternoon before she died. I saw it in the paper the next day. That's why I blame myself. It was dreadful. I can't think of anything else."

" Did anyone see you there? Besides Eunice? "

" Y-yes. A man was leaving as I arrived. I don't know who. He wore dungarees and a leather jacket. He had a bicycle."

So that was all right, too. It was Gus Haverstein, the handyman, who saw to the boiler three times a day. A witness. Roger leaned back.

The hypnotic thud of engines and swishing of tyres all round them seemed to induce another even clearer kind of vision. It became so clear, so solid in its structure, that his first plan, merely to frame Sally for murder, showed up in contrast as weak and shadowy. That plan had been to get Sally's fingerprints on the second bottle of medicine, hide it somewhere in the cottage where the police in their cursory search might have overlooked it, but where Gus would find it and take it to the police.

Then surely the police would question Roger about it. He would see to it, cleverly, that they had Sally's letter; that would establish a motive. Gus would remember having seen her at the cottage. All that, at the very least, would induce a reasonable doubt, a question of murder. But that would mean a trial.

A trial had its dangers. A murder trial brought out all kinds of small facts, odd details, hard to explain, that might trip up even the most successful murderer. There had been no questions up to then. Sometimes it was better to let sleeping dogs lie.

His new plan would settle everything, answer all questions, end the investigation . . .

The inquest had been easy; it was brief and sympathetic. The village doctor had given evidence: Mrs. Ledyard's heart condition had needed little special care; there was a slight irregularity which had developed recently (after her physical examination by the insurance doctors, Roger thought grimly,) and he had

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prescribed a stimulant, a few drops of digitalis when necessary; it was in liquid form, he'd been prescribing it like that for thirty years; besides, tablets would have made no difference; she'd have taken those just the same. The doctor and the coroner had known about Eunice's drinking; the doctor had mentioned it in a low voice, casting Roger a sympathetic glance.

They'd all been sorry for him, a man whose wife drinks and then, drinking, takes an overdose of medicine. There'd been no doubt that that was what had happened. Eunice's fingerprints were on the bottle of whisky, and on the empty bottle of medicine, which he'd dropped carefully, so that Eunice would not see, behind the cushions on the sofa. Her fingerprints and hers alone were on the glass from which she had taken her last drink. They had investigated that, but it was a routine check. Nobody had suspected him.

Gus, who had found Eunice, had given evidence, too. He hadn't mentioned Sally and her black car, but he had seen no significance in that. Well, he'd see the significance soon. He'd be made to see it.

For the new plan had no flaws.

Would it be dangerous? Of course the insurance company would be cautious, inquisitive. But they wouldn't suspect him, because he hadn't known that Eunice had taken out a life insurance policy. Manson would convince them of that.

It would be far less dangerous than a trial.

Roger Ledyard was thinking so deeply that he scarcely noticed the way they went, although he did see, with peculiar irritation, that Sally had coins in her pocket, ready for the toll bridges. That was like Sally; she was forthright, practical; a man didn't really like that.

Sally, too, seemed deeply abstracted, driving with a concentration which was both alert and automatic. She drove well. She would, he thought with dislike. Once, however, she tried to speak of Eunice, her voice unexpectedly small and wavering.

He stopped that immediately. "We'll not talk about it, dear—ever again."

She bit her lip, but said no more. And he wanted to think; one way or another he had to make up his mind. He realized suddenly that they had almost reached the turn off the fly-over. He said, "To the right here. Then under the fly-over."

"I know," Sally said.

Of course she knew; she'd hunted him down—on the strength of a few idle words on his part, a few embraces. She'd hunted him down; she'd discovered the cottage he'd insisted that Eunice

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should lease—for her health, he'd said; but in fact it was to give him more freedom while he pretended to look for a job.

The thin, lemon-coloured twilight vanished abruptly as they turned along the winding country road. Woods on either side stood black and impenetrable. It was a lonely place; Eunice had complained of that.

Sally hesitated, peering through the beam of the headlights to see the turn into the lane which led up to the cottage; then she chose it unerringly. The car bumped and thudded along the stony, narrow lane and came to a halt beside the thick hedge of lilacs.

It was behind the lilacs that he had parked the afternoon before Eunice's death so that no one would see him; not that it mattered, really, because he'd be gone; he *was* gone long before there was any chance of Eunice's body being found; he had even established an alibi of sorts, dinner in the restaurant of a hotel where page-boys, waiters, everyone knew him. He had lingered in the entrance for a long time, reading the newspapers under the eye of the hall porter.

It was some time after ten when Gus, returning to stoke the boiler for the night as he always did, had found Eunice, and the telephone call had come for Roger.

Sally turned off the engine. The shrill sweet whistle of small frogs instantly surrounded them, as if a million tiny creatures were aroused and curious. The cottage, of course, was dark. Suddenly he realized that his decision had been made. The time was now—And then safety, and fifty thousand dollars.

Roger roused himself. He must hurry. As he got out of the car, Sally said, "Do you mind if I wait here?"

"But I . . . Of course, if you'd rather. It's only that this is the hard part. Going into the cottage alone. Perhaps we'd better abandon it and go back to town."

"Oh, no," Sally said, and followed him to the door.

Roger's hands were shaking as he tried to fit the key in the lock. He hadn't expected that.

Suddenly he wanted to leave, go back to the car, never enter the cottage again. It was as if Eunice might still be there on the sofa, with her pasty pale face, her frowsy hair, her sagging sweater and skirt—with drooping flowers in the vases, dust everywhere, the ashtrays full, rings of glasses showing on the table-tops.

He turned the key in the lock, reached for the light switch, and quietly dropped the catch of the door again.

He must behave naturally. "Let me take your coat. It's cold now. I'll turn on the fire."

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"No, thank you. It's only for a few moments." Sally was very white. But she let him take her coat and sat stiffly, like a child, in the armchair while he turned on the electric fire. There was no time to be lost; his new, and much better plan meant that he must leave Sally's car there in the shadow of the lilac hedge and walk five miles to the train.

Nobody would know him on the train; an hour or so later he would be back in his own flat. Gus, the handyman, did not come regularly now to the cottage, but he kept everything in running order. It might be several days before he found what he was to find. But there was no time to be lost.

"I'll get you a drink," Roger said, turning to Sally.

"No, thank you. I don't think I want one."

"You're cold. Besides, I need a little courage myself." He went into the kitchen. He still wore his gloves and overcoat; Sally could not see him. He knew exactly what to do because he had done it before, so easily, so successfully.

He drew out the two ice trays; they had been refilled; he pried out a couple of ice cubes and put them in a tall, amber glass. He took the bottle of digitalis from his pocket and poured its contents over the ice cubes. He must remember to make Sally's drink a strong one to cover the taste; he hadn't had to trouble about that with Eunice for he knew that she would pour the whisky for herself almost to the top of the glass. Then with a loud clatter he dumped the remaining contents of the ice trays into the sink.

He called out to Eunice—no, no, it was to Sally this time but the words were the same—"There's rust in the water again, in the ice. I've dumped out the ice. I'll let the water run clear and refill the trays. But I've left some ice in your glass, darling, in the fridge, so you'll have your drink—" He caught himself with horror; his triumphant first performance had carried him too far; he had almost said, So you'll have your drink before dinner. But he had turned on the tap as he spoke; Sally couldn't have heard above the sound of rushing water; besides, he hadn't really said anything.

Now for the next step, which was not rehearsed; he'd known that Eunice would get out the whisky bottle. He called out to Sally, "Will you get out the whisky, Sally? It's in the cupboard beside you."

This time, of course, he couldn't wait for the medicine to congeal somewhat in the glass, so Sally, if she noted any difference would only think that it was the rust in the water. He refilled the ice trays; that was important; nobody must suspect that a simple little matter of ice had anything to do with sudden death.

He put the trays back in the freezer, his gloves making him a

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little clumsy. Then he took the amber glass with the ice in it, and an empty glass for himself, and went back to the living-room. Sally was still sitting on the straight chair but she had got out the bottle of whisky; it stood on the table. He poured whisky into her glass, almost to the brim; Sally might object to the strength of the drink but she'd sip some of it.

He poured a little neat whisky into a glass for himself. He turned, holding the other glass to Sally, and had a shock.

Her coat and scarf lay on the chair near the door; she was wearing a brown dress with a round blue collar. But she also wore blue gloves.

He hadn't noticed her hands on the wheel while she was driving; he'd had other things to think about. But her fingerprints were not, as they should be, on the whisky bottle.

He put the glass down on the small table beside Sally. Then he knelt beside her. "Dear, you must warm your hands." He forced himself to speak gently, persuading her.

And slowly, in a dazed fashion, she pulled off her gloves. She seemed curiously withdrawn and remote, although she was gazing at him very steadily. He held the full glass towards her.

"Here, my dear."

She didn't take the glass, but only looked at him until he felt awkward, standing there holding it. Finally she shook her head. "No. I don't want a drink, Roger."

"Please join me."

She rose. "No, I really don't want it. Thank you."

"What's the matter, Sally?" He essayed a tone of jocularity. "I need a drink but I don't want to drink alone. Down the hatch with it, dear. Then I'll get the papers and we'll go back to town."

She didn't move; there was an oddly adamant quality in her steady gaze. He put the iced glass on the table beside her, downed his own drink, and swiftly chose a card which had never failed him with Eunice. "Darling," he said, "I love you so much. Just a whim—to please me—"

He offered the glass again, and Sally said, "I'm sorry, Roger."

Sorry? He went on, coaxing, swiftly improvising. "That was why I couldn't let myself see you or even write to you. I had to work things out somehow with Eunice—a divorce, something. It wasn't fair to you. I deceived you—not intentionally at first. Later, when I knew how much I loved you, I couldn't tell you about Eunice. Not yet. I had to come to you honestly and say, 'Sally, I love you. I want you to marry me.'"

Instead of weakening, Sally moved away from him. "That's what I meant. I'm sorry." She swallowed hard and went on,

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" I thought I loved you. It was all so—so romantic, the moonlight and the snow and the great roaring fires at night and . . . But I was wrong."

" Sally! "

" I knew it when I met Eunice the day she—died. I—something changed. I can't help it, Roger. I was wrong. Now I want to go back to town. I'll go as soon as you are ready."

" You can't make me believe that, Sally." He played another card. " We'll have such a gay, happy life. There'll be money—"

" Money? "

" Fifty thousand—" He caught himself. He hadn't meant to say that.

Something moved in Sally's eyes, like the flick of a camera's shutter. He said quickly, " Eunice had money, you know, and—"

" I saw Eunice. I talked to her. She told me you loved her. She told me how kind, how thoughtful you were. She quoted . . ." Her steady gaze went to the full glass on the table beside her. " There was a tall, amber glass like that one—she was about to have a drink. She said—" Sally stopped.

Roger said, " Eunice drank. I didn't want to tell you that."

For a moment Sally stood so still that there was only the tiny flutter of a pulse in her white throat. Then she said, " I'm sorry about that, too," and crossed the room for her coat.

He wanted to seize her, twist that little white throat, pour the lethal drink down it. He drew the now-empty medicine bottle from his pocket. " I'm upset, Sally. Look at this. I found it in the kitchen."

She hesitated, but then she came back to him.

" The police must have missed it. They found another bottle, empty like this. What shall I do with it? Have a look." He was dropping it into her fingers, but abruptly she withdrew her hands, and the bottle fell; it struck the hearthrug. For an instant, his heart shook; suppose the bottle had broken.

It hadn't. Sally turned and went back to the door. She took up her coat, and a kind of desperation seized Roger. How could he have guessed that she would be so stubborn?

She said over her shoulder, almost casually, " What did you do with my letter, Roger? "

He didn't dare look to see if a betraying white edge of it showed in his overcoat pocket. " It's at my flat," he lied. " It's a—a dear letter, Sally."

" I've got to go now, Roger," Sally said, moving to the door.

He sprang across the room, and stood before the door. " I won't let you go."

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She faced him, her eyes strangely still. What was that look? Horror? Accusation? It didn't matter.

His mind was racing, seeking ways and means. What would look like suicide?

In a dazzling flash he remembered Eunice's revolver. It had belonged to her first husband. She had a licence for it. She had lived much of the time alone in this remote cottage; there was no irregularity about it. The police had seen it; there had been some discussion, but the coroner had settled that.

"It was easier to take an overdose of medicine," he had said. "It's queer, but women hate anything violent. They'd rather take the easy way."

It had been loaded; the police had warned him that it was dangerous to leave a loaded revolver lying around. Where was the gun? In the bedroom somewhere. Stupid of him not to think of it before; he'd kept his gloves on; he'd put Sally's fingerprints on it—later. Leave the letter.

"All right," he said, smiling. "I'm upset. So are you. It's the cottage. I'll get the papers I came to fetch and we'll go back to town."

Sally hesitated; then she said quietly, "All right."

He hurried the length of the room, his footsteps loud. At the bedroom door it struck him suddenly that Sally was intending to make a bolt, run out, climb into the car, get away. He turned, but she was standing near the door, her head bent as if she was listening to something, the debate in her own mind perhaps; it didn't matter.

He went into the bedroom and began to search the chest of drawers, hurling aside heaps of Eunice's faded, once luxurious underclothing. He found the revolver and squinted through the barrel; it was not loaded. So he began to rummage again feverishly, and someone knocked at the door.

It was a loud knock, reverberating through the cottage. Panic caught him, but there was only one person it could be, and he'd get rid of him. He called to Sally, "It's Gus. The handyman. Open the door, will you?"

She had already opened the door. He heard the murmur of voices. He found the box he needed, down in a corner of the drawer. He loaded the revolver quickly, but carefully, in case the slight click could be heard; and then he realized it was not Gus. He listened.

The man was saying ". . . Eunice's brother. I thought I'd like to see where she—see the cottage."

Sally said, "Of course. Come in. Roger is here."

The red-tinged mist surrounded Roger Ledyard again; he

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fought it back. This made a complication. The answer was, ride the wave, but first get rid of Bill. He slid the loaded gun into his pocket. The people in the next room were talking with the kind of warm immediacy of two young things—trivialities, nothing that meant anything.

" I got lost a couple of times. Couldn't find the turn. I had to ask."

" So did I."

There was a pause, a subtle alteration in the atmosphere. " I thought you said Roger was with you."

" Oh, yes, he's here tonight. He's in the bedroom getting some papers."

Again there was a little pause. Then Bill said, but with that very subtle change in his voice, " You knew Eunice, then? "

" No—that is, yes. I—met her once."

" When was that? "

Sally, the fool, was going to answer . . .

" The afternoon Eunice died—"

Roger flung the door open and went into the living-room.

" Bill," he said heartily. " I'm glad to see you."

Bill had taken off his overcoat; he stood before the fire looking remarkably solid. His expression was firm and hard; there was no trace of the diffidence of their earlier interview. He said, " Yes. I thought I'd like to see the cottage, see how Eunice lived."

He must show hospitality. " I'll get you a drink."

Bill glanced at the two glasses, one empty, the other still full.

" No, thanks. You've just had some. I'll not keep you."

" We were just about to go back to town. Sally very kindly brought me up here in her car."

Bill said nothing. Sally said nothing.

" Now that you're here, do sit down. If you won't have a drink, how about a cigarette? "

" I've got my own," Bill said, and lit one. " To tell you the truth, Roger, I wanted to ask you some questions. Why did Eunice live in a deserted place like this? Wasn't she lonely? "

" She liked it. Of course, I came as often as I could."

" I didn't ask what your job is, Roger. Oh, I knew that you were an assistant manager of the hotel where she met you. But, since then, what have you been doing? "

Frankness was the best course. " The fact is, I've been looking for a job."

Bill merely eyed him thoughtfully over the smoke from his cigarette.

Roger asked shortly, " Any other questions? "

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"Yes. Why did Eunice take to drink?"

"Well I—I don't know. Perhaps she'd started it, as you suggested, after her first husband—"

"No. I thought about that. I was wrong. Eunice wouldn't have started drinking for a reason like that. She was used to earning her own living. Besides, she knew I'd help her. So when did she begin to drink? Why?"

"I don't know. I blame myself—"

"Yes, I think you should. Eunice was easy game in a way. But she loved you so much that she allowed herself to deceive you—in order to catch you, didn't she? Let you think she had been left his money, not just an income for life. You *were* surprised about her money, you know . . . You had no pity for her, had you, Roger?" He glanced at Sally. "How long have you two been on such friendly terms?"

"What do you mean by that?" Roger demanded indignantly.

"She came here to see Eunice for the first time, the afternoon before Eunice died. I'm beginning to think there was a reason for Eunice's drinking. And a reason for her death. A very pretty reason," Bill said.

Sally flinched as if someone had struck her across the face. A wave of pink came into her cheeks. She was going to speak, and Roger had to stop her. Bill's frank suspicion could be turned to advantage. He'd have to alter his plan but not in its essentials. Bill—Eunice's own brother—would be the witness who would produce a motive.

Roger pulled out Sally's letter. "You're all wrong, Bill. Sally didn't know about Eunice until she came up here to see me and—here, I'll show you. Sally had nothing to do with Eunice's suicide." He shoved the letter at Bill. Sally gave a queer stifled cry, but Bill was already reading the letter with swift concentration.

He raised his head. "So that's the way it was. And Eunice died that very night. This didn't come out at the inquest. This afternoon I read the report in last week's local newspaper. Why didn't it?"

"There was no reason for it. Eunice committed suicide. I didn't know that Sally had been here."

"You know now!"

"She had nothing to do with it. Now, Bill, I'm in a hurry to get back to town." Sally didn't speak; how long would she keep her mouth shut? Roger moved to the door.

Bill said, "There's not all that hurry, is there?" As Bill walked towards a chair he noticed the empty medicine bottle. He picked it up. "What's this?" He read the prescription.

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Roger said, " It's one of Eunice's medicine bottles. I found it in the kitchen."

Bill turned the bottle slowly in his brown, hard fingers; then he put it on the mantelpiece and sat down in a leisurely way in the straight chair. " I think I will have a drink, after all."

" I'll get it—"

" Oh, don't do that. This one hasn't been touched." He lifted the glass.

Sally screamed, " *Don't!* "

Bill stopped. He looked at Sally, he looked at Roger, then at the glass. " What's going on here? "

Sally was about to tell him. Roger rushed in, " Nothing's going on. I don't like your attitude. Get out of here."

Bill rose, still holding the glass. " I wonder which of you that was meant for? "

" Get out! " Roger shouted, the red rage all round him.

" You've a gun in your pocket, haven't you? " Bill asked quietly, and flung the contents of the glass full into Roger's face.

Through the stinging, blinding chaos of pain, Roger felt his own hand tugging at the revolver. He heard shots but something hard and savage had hurled itself upon him, forcing him back, down, down until there was a kind of crash—and then nothing.

Bill rolled the inert figure over and looked at it. " Knocked out. I suppose he killed her."

" I—think so."

" Gave her the stuff in a drink, too? "

" In the ice, I think. She—told me. She said he loved her, you see; and he was so kind. Just before he left he'd put ice in her glass, in the refrigerator. She quoted him.

" And he said that to me, the same words. There wasn't any reason to put a glass for me in the fridge; he brought it to me, right away."

Bill had her letter in his hand. She said, " I thought I loved him. But I didn't. When I saw Eunice, I—I knew I didn't."

" I know," Bill said, and dropped her letter in the fire; they both watched while it curled and turned brown. " He thought Eunice had money; he was disappointed."

" He said he'd have fifty thousand. He said it just now. And then I knew."

" That's odd. That's very odd. I wonder . . ."

A grey man by the name of Manson could have explained it.

Sally said, " But why me? "

Manson could have told them that, too, and later did.

Bill said, " Because he guessed that you knew, perhaps."

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"How did you know?"

"The fear in your eyes. You'd better go out to your car and wait there. I'll see to things."

She did; she waited in her car, with the chorus of small frogs, sweet and shrill all round her. Police arrived; more lights went on in the cottage.

After a time Bill came out. "They want a statement from you, Sally. Then they'll see to my car and I'll take you home."

He helped her out, his hand under her arm. "It'll be all right."

They paused to look up at the bright spring stars; then they went up the path together. © Mignon G. Eberhart 1958

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WINE, WOMEN, AND HORSES

Any one of these is a hazard—all three a real gamble. However, venture a little on each of these questions below before looking up the winners on page 149.

1. *Who was the lady responsible for the import of thousands of casks of claret into England at a penny a gallon?*
2. *What red wine has a white name?*
3. *A girl you are taking out chooses the following menu: hors d'œuvre; sole Dieppoise; creamed chicken; bombe glacée. What one wine should you choose for the whole meal?*
4. *In the middle of the eighteenth century The Star and Garter Coffee House in Pall Mall was famous for its wine and good company. What is its claim to fame?*
5. *What lady rode the only starter?*
6. *What famous château in the Bordeaux wine district was once owned by an English king, and who was he?*
7. *What is Horse's Neck? Jingle (when it isn't spurs)? What is Stone Fence?*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD

on page 160

Across. 1, *Width.* 4, *Boastings.* 8, *Dicer.* 9, *Outspread.* 11, *Brim.* 12, *Level.* 13, *Lyon.* 16, *Feather-stitch.* 19, *Half-heartedly.* 20, *Buck.* 22, *Stock.* 23, *Hind.* 26, *Homicidal.* 27, *Aptly.* 28, *Astronomy.* 29, *Felid.*

Down. 1, *Wide berth.* 2, *Deceitful.* 3, *Hard.* 4, *Broken-hearted.* 5, *Type.* 6, *Needy.* 7, *Sidon.* 10, *Theoretically.* 14, *Cache.* 15, *Studs.* 17, *Toy pistol.* 18, *Hamadryad.* 20, *Bohea.* 21, *Comet.* 24, *Echo.* 25, *Half.*

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Let's play soldiers

BY H. E. BATES

THE yellow strings of laburnum flower had already faded that afternoon when I stood on sentry for the 1st Battalion Albion Street Light Infantry and Mrs. Strickland came out of her kitchen door wearing a sack apron and a man's check cap pinned on her spindly curling rags by a long black hat pin, and started shaking mats against the garden fence, not three yards from the tent made of split sacks and old lace curtains where we of the battalion held councils of war before going into battle.

Upstairs across the yard Mrs. Rankin was sitting at a window, with a bottom like a pumpkin hanging over the sill, huffing energetically on glass already as pure as crystal and then scrupulously polishing the vapour off again with a spotless yellow rag.

The face of Mrs. Rankin, smooth and clean as porcelain, looked as if it had been polished too, but the face of Mrs. Strickland, like her curl-ragged hair, had nothing but greyness in it, a dopey salty greyness at the same time hard, so that the skin looked like scoured pumice stone.

I was only seven at the time and still a private; but I thought I detected a smell of parsnip wine in the air. Mangled dust and shreds of coco-matting rose in dense brown clouds as Mrs. Strickland beat the decaying mats against the fence, but I stood unshakeably at attention under the laburnum tree, head up, eyes straight ahead, right hand firmly on the umbrella we were using as a rifle because Jeddah Clarke, our Captain, had the airgun, the only other weapon we possessed.

I knew that if I stood firm on guard and didn't flinch, and saluted properly and challenged people, and didn't let them pass until they gave the password, I might become, in time, a lance-corporal. There was nothing on earth I wanted more than to be a lance-corporal: except perhaps to kill a soldier.

"I wisht Albie was here," Mrs. Strickland said.

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It wasn't only that morning her voice had that pumice-dry melancholy in it. It was always there, like the curling rags. Sometimes Mrs. Strickland didn't take out the curling rags until after Bill Strickland came home for his bloater tea at six o'clock, and sometimes she didn't take them out at all.

"Ain't got a spare Daisy, gal, I reckon?"

Mrs. Strickland, staring with diffused and pleading eyes through the dust she had raised, groping up towards the sumptuous pumpkin of Mrs. Rankin on the window-sill, ran a dreary hand several times across her brow.

"Ain't got nivry one left," Mrs. Rankin said. "You had the last one yisty."

Daisies were a brand of headache powder guaranteed to refresh and free you from pain in five minutes. Mrs. Strickland was taking them all day.

"Ain't Bill a-workin' then?"

"Bad abed. Can't lift 'isself orf the piller. I wisht Albie was here."

I knew Albie couldn't be there. Albie, who was eighteen, a private too like me, was in France, fighting the Germans. I liked Albie: he had a ginger moustache and was my friend. Every other day or so, I asked Mrs. Strickland if and when Albie was going to become a lance-corporal, but somehow she never seemed to think he was.

"Ain't you got nivry one tucked away, gal, somewheer?"

"Nivry one," Mrs. Rankin said. "Nivry one."

Despair wrapped Mrs. Strickland's face in a greyer, dustier web of gloom.

"My 'ead's splittin'. It'll split open. I wisht Albie was here."

"Won't the boy nip and get y' couple? Ask the boy."

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Mrs. Strickland, seeming to become aware of me for the first time, turned to my impassive sentinel figure with eyes of greyest supplication.

"Nip down the shop and fetch us a coupla Daisies, there's a good boy. Nip and ask your mother to lend us a thrippenny bit, there's a good boy. I left me puss upstairs."

It was funny, my mother said, how Mrs. Strickland was always leaving, losing, or mislaying her purse somewhere.

"And a penn'orth o' barm too, boy, while you're down there. I gotta make a mite o' bread, somehow," she called up to Mrs. Rankin. "Ain't got a mite in the place, gal. Not so much as a mossel."

Mrs. Rankin, who would presently be hurrying down to the yard to scour and whitewash the kitchen steps to blinding, glacier whiteness and who, as my mother said, almost polished the coal before putting it on the fire, merely turned on Mrs. Strickland a rounder, blanker, completely silent pumpkin.

I didn't move either; I was on guard. Jeddah Clarke said you could be shot if you moved on guard.

"Nip and ask your mother to lend us a thrippenny bit, boy. Tanner if she's got it, boy—"

"I can't go, Mrs. Strickland. I'm on sentry," I said. "I'll get shot."

"Kids everywhere," Mrs. Strickland said, "and nivry one on 'em to run of arrant for you when you want. I wisht Albie was here."

Mrs. Strickland dragged the decaying mats to the middle of the yard. The smell of parsnip wine went with her and she called up to Mrs. Rankin, "Ain't got 'arf a loaf I can have for a goin' on with, gal, I reckon? Jist till the baker gits here? Jist 'arf? Jist the top?"

"You want one as'll fit on the bottom I lent you the day afore yisty, or will a fresh 'un do?"

Fiery, tempestuous white curls seemed to fly suddenly out of Mrs. Strickland's mournful, aching head.

"What's a matter wi' y'? Askt y' a civil question, dint I? Askt y' civil question. What's a matter wi' y' all of a pop?"

"Sick on it," Mrs. Rankin said. "About sick to death on it."

"Go on, start maungin'! Start yelpin'!"

"Yelpin', yelpin'? Ain't got nothing to yelp about, I reckon, have I? When it ain't bread, it's salt. When it ain't salt, it's bakin' powder. Enough to gie y' the pip. When it ain't—"

"Keep on, keep on!" Mrs. Strickland said. "It'll do your fat gullet good. And me with 'im in bed. And the damn war on. And Albie not here."

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Suddenly she dropped the mats, picked up a bucket from the kitchen drain and started beating and rattling it like a war-gong. In a flash Mrs. Rankin's pumpkin darted through the window, dragging the sash down behind it. Behind the crystal glass Mrs. Rankin's face remained palely distorted, mouthing furiously.

Down below in the yard, Mrs. Strickland rattled the bucket again, shaking her curling rags, and yelled, "Mag, mag. Jaw, jaw. That's all folks like you are fit for. Mag, jaw, mag, jaw—"

Mrs. Rankin's face, ordinarily so polished and composed, splintered into uncontrollable furies behind the glass as Mrs. Strickland started to fill the bucket with water from the standpipe in the yard.

In a second Mrs. Rankin had the window up with a shrilling squeak of the sash and was half leaping out. "And don't you start your hanky-pankies. Don't you start that! I oiled and polished my door—"

An arc of white water struck Mrs. Rankin's back door like a breaker. Mrs. Rankin slammed down the window and started beating the panes with her fists. Mrs. Strickland screamed that she wisht Albie was here, Albie would let some daylight into somebody, and threw the bucket with a crashing roll across the yard.

A bedroom window shot open in the Strickland house and an unsober chin of black stubble leaned out and bawled, "What the bloody 'ell's going on down there? If you two don't shut your yawpin' chops I'll come right down and lay a belt acrosst the pair on y'—"

"I wisht Albie was here!" Mrs. Strickland said. "I wisht Albie was here!"

Drearily she slammed away into the house, and after that it was silent for some minutes until suddenly, from the street beyond the yard, I could hear the inspiring note of war cries. A minute later the 1st Battalion Albion Street Light Infantry came triumphantly pounding down the path between the cabbage patches led by Jeddah Clarke, carrying the airgun; Wag Chettle, bearing the standard, a red handkerchief tied to a bean-pole; and Fred Baker, beating a drum he had had for Christmas.

Fred and Jeddah were actually in khaki uniforms. Jeddah, besides the airgun, wore a bandoleer across his chest with real pouches and two clips of spent cartridges; Fred had a peaked khaki cap on, with the badge of the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry on one side and that of the Royal Welch Fusiliers on the other. At that time the Fusiliers were billeted in the town and we had an inspired admiration for them because they kept a white goat

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as mascot. The goat ate anything you gave it, even cigarettes.

What now surprised me about the battalion was not its air of triumph but its size. Usually it was no more than eight strong. Now it was twenty. Those bringing up the rear were even flying a second flag. It was a square of blue-and-white football shirt.

I caught the gleam of a second and even a third airgun, and then suddenly Jeddah Clarke, our Captain, raised his airgun and yelled, "Gas Street are on our side! They're in the battalion! Gas Street are with us! Charge!"

We all cheered madly and charged. The little hairs of my neck stuck up in pride, excitement, and admiration as we thundered dustily into the summer street outside.

"Charge!" we all shouted. "Charge! Capture 'em! Charge!"

Heady with thought of battle, we wheeled like thunder into Winchester Street: completely unnoticed by a milk float, two bakers' carts, a chimney-sweep on a bicycle, and two women pushing prams.

"Charge!" I yelled, and was stunned to hear the blast of a bugle, suddenly blown at my side by a boy named Charley Fletcher, who was in the Boys' Brigade.

This new note, defiant above the roll of Fred Baker's drum, had us all in a frenzy of battle lust as we surged past a railway dray loading piles of bulky leather outside a factory, where the crane swung out from its fourth-storey door like a gallows and dropped its thirty feet of rippling chain down to the shining hot pavement below.

"Charge!" I yelled, bringing up the rear with the umbrella under my arm and pointing it forward as if it had a bayonet in the end, exactly as I had seen in pictures of soldiers charging from the trenches. There was nothing we didn't know about soldiers and the trenches. We knew all about Vimy Ridge, Ypres, Hill 60, and Verdun, too.

The voice of our Captain, Jeddah Clarke, tore the air with fresh challenge as we whipped out of Winchester Street into Green's Alley. Continually Charley Fletcher's bugle ripped the quiet of the afternoon to shreds with raucous notes that were almost hysterical, rallying both us and the reinforcements of Gas Street, and I wondered suddenly where we were going and where the attack would be made.

Jeddah, yelling, told us all a moment later, "Down to The Pit! We'll git 'em in The Pit!"

My heart went absolutely icy, turned sour, and dropped to my stomach.

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The Pit was a terrible place. You never went to The Pit. No one ever did. If you did you never came out alive. The people there, who lived in sordid back-to-back hovels with sacks at the windows, captured you, tied you up, locked you in satanic privies, and let you suffocate to death. If they didn't do that they starved you, took away all your clothes, and sold you naked in slavery. They were the most awful people in the world. They were always dirty, drunk, and fighting. They were always stinking, and they were full of bugs and fleas. People like Mrs. Strickland were respectable by comparison.

I suddenly wanted to turn back, stand guard in the cabbage patch, and dream quietly about being a lance-corporal one day.

"Charge!" everyone yelled. "Charge! Git the stones ready!"

Out of Green's Alley we swung on the tide of battle into The Jetty, a narrow track of dried mud and stone. There the triumphant column broke up for a moment or two, and we began to hack stones from the dust with the heels of our boots. By this time my legs and knees were shaking: so much so that all I could hack out were two pebbles and the stopper of a broken beer bottle. But Fred Baker, seeing this, took pity on me and armed me with half a brick.

The bugle sounded again, shrill as a cornet.

"Airguns in front!" Jeddah yelled. "Git ready when I say charge!"

We thundered on. We had been joined now by a butcher's boy on a bicycle and for some reason I found myself clinging to his saddle. Suddenly in the excitement the butcher's boy started pedalling madly and I could hardly keep up with the column as it pounded along.

Less than a minute later we were facing the jaws of The Pit. They were nothing more than a gap between two rows of derelict gas-tarred fences but beyond them I could see the little one-storey hovels with sacks at their windows, the horrible squat brick prisons of outdoor privies, and a few dirty flags of shirt on a washing line.

It was impossible for my heart to turn cold a second time; it was frozen stiff already. But the paralysis that kept it stuck at the pit of my stomach now affected my legs and I stopped running.

This, as it turned out, was a purely instinctive reaction. Everyone else had stopped running, too.

"Charge!" someone yelled, and this time it was not our Captain, Jeddah.

The order came from behind us and, as we turned in its

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direction, we found ourselves the victims of the oldest of all battle manœuvres. We were being attacked in the rear.

This time my eyes froze. The Pit Brigade stood waiting for us: eight or ten of them, headed by a black-mouthed deaf-mute armed with a five-foot two-pronged hoe. Another had an ugly strip of barrel-hoop sharpened up like a sword, and another a catapult with a black leather sling big enough to hold an egg. He was smoking a cigarette. Two others were manning a two-seater pram armoured with rusty plates of corrugated iron and this, we all realized, was an armament we did not possess. It was the first tank we had encountered.

The deaf-mute started showing his black teeth, gurgling strange cries. He made vigorous deaf-and-dumb signs with his hands, and the snarling faces about him jabbered. The entire Pit Brigade, older, bigger, dirtier, and better armed than we were, stood ready to attack.

It was too late to think about being a lance-corporal now, and a moment later they were on us.

"Charge!" everyone shouted from both sides. "Charge!" and we were an instant clash of bricks, stones, catapults, flags, sticks, and airguns that would not fire. Above it all the unearthly voice of the deaf-mute gurgled like a throttled man, mouthing black nothings.

I threw my brick. It fell like the legendary arrow in the air. Someone started to tear the coat off my back, and I thrashed madly about me with the umbrella. I could see our two flags rocking ship-mast fashion in the centre of battle and Charley Fletcher using the bugle as a hammer. The two-pronged hoe fell like a claw among us, and the armour-plates fell off the pram-tank as it ran into Fred Baker and cut his legs, drawing first blood. Soon we actually had them retreating.

"We're the English!" I heard Jeddah shouting. "We're the English! The Pit are the bloody Germans," and the cry of country roused us to fresh thrills of battle frenzy.

"We're the English!" we all yelled. "We're the English!"

Suddenly as if a trapdoor had opened, the Pit Brigade under sheer weight of pressure fell backward into the jaws of The Pit, hastily slamming the door behind them as a barricade and leaving outside a single stray soldier armed with a rusty flat-iron suspended on a piece of cord and dressed as a sergeant of the Royal Artillery, complete with spurs and puttees.

Cut off from the tide of battle, this soldier gave several rapid and despairing looks about him, dropped the flat-iron, and bolted like a hare.

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"Prisoner!" Jeddah yelled. "Prisoner! Get him! Take him prisoner!"

In a moment Fred Baker, Charley Fletcher, and myself were after him. We caught him at the top of The Jetty. At first he lay on his back and kicked out at us with the spurs, spitting at the same time, but soon I was sitting on his face, Fred Baker on his chest, and Charley Fletcher, who was the eldest, on his legs. He kept trying to spit at us, and all the time there was a strong, putrid, stinking, funny smell about him.

We kept him prisoner all afternoon. Then we decided to strip him. While Fred and I sat on his face and chest, Charley unrolled the puttees and took off the spurs.

"You always have spoils of war when you take prisoners," Charley explained. "Soldiers call it a bit of buckshee."

We spent some time arguing about how the buckshee should be divided. Finally Charley was awarded the puttees, because he was the eldest, and Fred Baker and I each had a spur. Having the spur was even better than being a lance-corporal and I couldn't remember ever having had anything that made me feel more proud.

It was almost evening before Jeddah and the rest of the battalion got back, fifty strong, from telling of our victory in far places, in Lancaster Street, Rectory Street, Bedford Row, King's Lane, and those parts of the town who could not be expected to hear of our triumph other than by word of mouth and from us.

"We still got the prisoner, Captain," we said. "What shall we do with him?"

"Shoot him," Jeddah said.

Orders were orders with Jeddah, and we asked if we could have the airgun. He handed it over.

"I leave it to you," Jeddah said. He was now wearing a forage cap, three long-service stripes, a leather belt, and a Welch black flash he had captured. "Charge!"

The sound of returning triumph from the fifty-strong battalion had hardly died away before we set to work to shoot the flat-iron boy.

First of all we made him stand up by the fence, among a pile of junk and nettles. By this time we had tied his hands and legs with the cord off the flat-iron, and had taken off his shoes so that he found it hard to run. But he still spat at us as he stood waiting to be shot.

Fred Baker shot him first. The unloaded airgun made a noise rather like a damp squib. Then Charley Fletcher shot him, and the gun made a noise like a damp squib a second time.

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Then I shot him, and as I did so I made a loud, realistic noise that was more like the crack of a bursting paper-bag. I aimed between the eyes of the flat-iron boy as I shot, and I was very thrilled.

"Now you're dead," we said to him. "Don't you forget. Don't you move—you're dead. You can't fight no more."

He didn't look very dead when we left him but we knew he was. We told the Captain so when we rejoined the battalion in Gas Street, Fred Baker blowing the bugle and wearing the artillery puttees, Charley Fletcher and I taking turns to carry the airgun and both of us waving a spur.

Jeddah was drunk with victory. "Tomorrow we're goin' to charge The Rock!" he said. The Rock was even worse than The Pit but now none of us was appalled and all of us cheered. There was no holding us now.

"We'll kill 'em all!" Jeddah said. "We'll burn ole Wag Saunders at the stake." Wag was their Captain. "Just like Indians. We'll win 'em. We ain't frit. Who are we?"

"We're the English!" we yelled.

It was already growing dark when I trotted home through the streets with my spur. In the back yard there were no lights in Mrs. Rankin's neat, white-silled windows and in Mrs. Strickland's house all the blinds were drawn although all the lights were on.

"Where have you been this long time?" my father said.

He sat alone in the kitchen, facing a cold rice pudding. My father was very fond of cold rice pudding but tonight he did not seem to want it. Under the grim gaslight the brown nutmeg skin of it showed unbroken.

"Fighting with our battalion," I said. I told him how the battle had been won and how I had captured the spur.

"The spur doesn't belong to you," he said. "Tomorrow morning you must take it back." I felt sick with disappointment and at the way grown-up people didn't understand you.

"Can I keep it just for tonight?"

"Just for tonight," he said. "But you must take it back tomorrow."

Then I remembered something and I told him how the boy I'd got it from was dead.

"How is that?" he said. "Dead?"

"We shot him."

"Oh! I see," he said. "Well, tomorrow you go and find the dead boy and give him back his spur."

Looking round the kitchen I now remembered my mother and asked where she was.

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"She's with Mrs. Strickland," my father said. "Mrs. Rankin's with her, too. I expect you noticed that all the blinds were drawn?"

I said I had noticed and did it mean that someone was dead?

"It's your friend—your friend Albie's not going to come back," my father said.

After that my father didn't seem to want to speak very much, and I said, "Could I go and play in the tent until Mother comes home?"

"You can go and play in the tent," he said.

"With a candle?" I said. "It's dark now outside."

"Take a candle if you like," he said.

I took a candle and sat in the tent all by myself, looking at my spur. It was shaped something like a handcuff to which was attached a silver star. The candlelight shone down on the spur with wonderful brilliance, and as I looked at it I remembered the voices of Mrs. Strickland and Mrs. Rankin squabbling with bitterness over a loaf of bread in the afternoon, and how Mrs. Strickland wisht that Albie would come back, and now I listened again for their voices coming from the outer darkness but all I could hear was the voice from the afternoon.

"I wisht Albie was here. I wisht Albie was here."

There is nothing much you can do with a solitary candle and a single spur. The spur can only shine like silver and the candlelight with a black vein in the heart of it.

Early next morning I took the spur back to The Pit. I ran all the way there and I was glad that no one saw me. The sun was coming up over the gas-tarred fences, the little hovels, the privies, and the washing lines and all I did was to lay the spur on a stone in the sunlight, hoping that someone would come and find it there.

I ran all the way home, too, as hard as I could: afraid of the enemy we had conquered and the soldier I had killed.

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STONY BROKERS

TO: MESSRS. FEWINGS AND CO.

Dear Sirs, I have pleasure in certifying that you have been of very great assistance to me in connection with my affairs and I shall certainly advise all my friends, as they become bankrupt, to avail themselves of your services.

Yours faithfully,
HORATIO BOTTOMLEY

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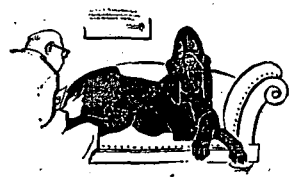
DOGGED DOES IT



A Dalmatian is no good, of course,
Without a carriage and horse.
And hounds are nice, but you've got
To have such a lot.

C. Fox Smith

Flirtatious—

I am an adorable Miniature Poodle, all-white, Fircot breeding, and at stud. Where can I find the pretty opposite?

Advertisement in The Times

—Suspicious

I am his Highness' dog at Kew ;
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you ?

Alexander Pope

Gay Dog

Retired lazy commander offers good home in Chelsea to retired (but house-trained) spaniel; short strolls in clement weather; must be good mixer.

Advertisement in The Times

Dog-Naps

The Pekinese
Adore their ease
And slumber like the dead ;
In comfort curled
They view the world
As one unending bed.

E. V. Lucas

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Dangerous Decision—

It was very usual to have dogs in private houses and their presence was something to be expected; a dog could not be said to be a danger or an unusual danger, and if a dog was in a dark place, it ought not to be regarded as an unusual danger. He [his Lordship] was not prepared to say that the existence of a dog in a dark place could not be regarded as constituting an unusual danger, but he thought that the decision in the present case depended upon whether, even if a dog was an unusual danger, the defendant knew or ought to have known it.

Law Report

—Delicate Affair

Paris has become dog-fashion conscious . . . For the dilettante dog, there is a range of gay coloured harnesses, hung with bells, and for the collector dog a charm collar, hung with trinkets or souvenirs of the places he has visited . . . No dog should be without a bottle of clear, pastel lotion, the elixir du Royaume des Fées. Rubbed in on a piece of soft cloth every morning it will, says the old-fashioned close black printed label, give the dog's coat a fine sheen and a delicate scent. It will also get rid of fleas. . .

Fashion Report in The Times

When in Doubt—

American dogs are developing stomach ulcers, reports Dr. William C. Glenney, president of the American Veterinary Radiology Society. The ulcers are caused by fears of traffic in city streets, doubts about food, and relations with other dogs . . .

News Item

—Consult a Psychiatrist

We hear that some American dogs go to psychiatrists. About ten dollars an hour will reveal why Fido bites the postman—may even stop him. Also available is low-calorie food for dieting dogs, plus a canine perfume called Kennel Number Five.

Woman

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★*Gerald Kersh wrote his first book at the age of seven and published it in a limited edition of one, bound in his father's brocade waistcoat. Pursuing his interest in literary curiosities, his new story explores a hitherto unrecorded (and highly improbable) episode in the life of Ambrose Bierce, famous American short-story writer, some of whose work appeared in Argosy.*

OXOXOCO BOTTLE

BY GERALD KERSH

THE fact that the intensely red colour of the glaze on the Oxoxoco bottle is due to the presence in the clay of certain uranium salts is of no importance. A similar colouring may be found in Bohemian and Venetian glass, for example. No, the archæologists at the British Museum are baffled by the shape of the thing. They cannot agree about the nature or the purpose.

Dr. Raisin, for example, says that it was not designed as a bottle at all, but rather as a musical instrument: a curious combination of the ocarina and the syrinx, because it has three delicately-curved, slender necks, and immediately below the middle neck, which is the longest, there is something like a finger-hole.

But in the opinion of Sir Cecil Sampson, who is a leading authority on ancient musical instruments, the Oxoxoco bottle was never constructed to throw back sounds.

Professor Masters, however, inclines to the belief that the Oxoxoco bottle is a kind of tobacco pipe: the two shorter necks curve upwards while the longer neck curves downwards to fit mouth and nostrils. Professor Masters indicates that smouldering herbs were dropped in at the " finger-hole " and that the user of the bottle must have inhaled the smoke through all his respiratory passages.

I have reason to believe that Professor Masters has guessed closest to the truth; although, if the document in my possession is genuine, it was not tobacco that they burnt in the squid-shaped body of the bottle.

It was intact, except for a few chips, when I bought it from a mestizo pedlar in Cuernavaca in 1948. " Genuine," he said; and this seemed to be the only English word he knew. " Genuine, genuine."

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He pointed towards the mountains and conveyed to me by writhings and convulsions, pointing to earth and sky, that he had picked up the bottle after an earthquake. At last I gave him five pesos for it, and forgot about it until, several years later, I found it when I was idling over a mess of dusty souvenirs; sombreros, huaraches, a stuffed baby alligator, and other trifles that tourists pick up in their wanderings, pay heavily for, and then give away to friends who consign them to some unfrequented part of the house.

The straw hats and other plaited objects had deteriorated. The stitches in the ventral part of the little alligator had given way, and the same had happened to the little Caribbean sting-ray. But the vessel, later to be known as the Oxoxoco bottle, seemed to glow.

I picked it up carelessly, saying to a friend who was spending that evening with me, " Now what this is, I don't know—" when it slipped from between my dusty fingers and broke against the base of a brass lamp.

My friend said, " Some sort of primitive cigar-holder, I imagine. See, there's still a cigar inside it . . . Or is it a stick of cinnamon? "

" What would they be doing with cinnamon in Mexico? " I asked, picking up this pale brown cylinder. It had a slightly oily texture and retained a certain aromatic odour. " What would you make of a thing like that? "

He took it from me gingerly, and rustled it at his ear between thumb and forefinger much in the manner of a would-be connoisseur " listening to " the condition of a cigar. An outer leaf curled back. The interior was pale yellow. He cried, " Bless my heart, man, it's paper—thin paper—and written on, too, unless my eyes deceive me."

So we took the pieces of the bottle and that panatella-shaped scroll to the British Museum. Professor Mayhew, of Ceramics, took charge of the broken bottle. Dr. Wills, of Ancient Manuscripts, went to work on the scroll with all the frenzied patience characteristic of such men, who will hunch their backs and go blind working for twenty years on a fragment of a Dead Sea scroll.

Oddly enough, he had this paper cigar unrolled and separated into leaves within six weeks, and he communicated with me, saying, " This is not an ancient manuscript. It is scarcely fifty years old. It was written in pencil on faint-ruled paper torn out of some reporter's notebook not later than 1914. This is not my pigeon. So I gave it to Greenlow, of Modern Manuscripts. Excuse me." And he disappeared by a book-lined door.

Dr. Greenlow had the papers on his table, covered with a heavy sheet of plate glass. He said to me, in a dry voice, " If this is a hoax, Mr. Kersh, I could recommend more profitable ways of expending the Museum's time and your own. If it is not a hoax, then it is one of the literary discoveries of the century. The Americans would be especially interested in it. They could afford to buy it. We could not. But it is curious, most curious."

" What is it? " I asked.

He took his time, in the maddening manner of such men, and

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said, " Considering the advanced age of the putative author of this narrative, there are certain discrepancies in the handwriting. The purported author of this must have been a very old man in about 1914, at which I place the date of its writing. Furthermore, he suffered from asthma and rheumatism. Yet, I don't know. If you will allow me to make certain inquiries . . . ? "

" What man? What rheumatism? What do you mean? "

He said, " I beg your pardon, I thought you knew. This—" he tapped the plate glass—" pretends to be the last written work of the American author, Ambrose Bierce. I have taken the liberty of having it photographed for your benefit. If we may keep this until next Monday or so for further investigation . . . ? "

" Do that," I answered, and took from him a packet of photographs, considerably enlarged from the narrow notebook sheets.

" He was a great writer! " I added. " One of America's greatest."

The Modern Manuscripts man shrugged. " Well, well. He was in London from 1872 until 1876. A newspaperman, a newspaperman. They used to call him ' Bitter ' Bierce. When he went back to America he worked—if my memory does not deceive me—mainly in San Francisco. Famous for his bitter tongue and his ghostly stories. He had talent. Academic circles in the United States will give you anything you like for this—if it is genuine. If . . . Now I beg you to excuse me."

Before we parted, he added, with a little smile, " I hope it is genuine for your sake and ours, because that would certainly clear up what is getting to be a warm dispute among our fellows in the Broken Crockery Department."

And here is the manuscript found in the Oxoxoco bottle.

Mount Popocatepetl looms over little Oxoxoco which, at first glance, is a charming and picturesque village, in the Mexican sense of the term. In this respect it closely resembles its human counterparts. Oxoxoco is picturesque and interesting—at a suitable distance, and beyond the range of one's nostrils.

Having become acquainted with it, the disillusioned traveller looks to the snowy peak of the volcano for a glimpse of cool beauty in this lazy, bandit-haunted, burnt-up land. But if he is a man of sensibility, he almost hopes that the vapours on the peak may give place to some stupendous eructation of burning gas, and a consequent eruption of molten lava which, hissing down into the valley, may cauterize this ulcer of a place from the surface of the tormented earth, covering all traces of it with a neat poultice of pumice stone and a barber's dusting of the finest white ashes.

They used to call me a good hater. This used to be so. London appalled me, New York disgusted me, and California nauseated me. I almost believe that I came to Mexico for something fresh to hate. Oxco, Taxco, Cuernavaca—they were all equally distasteful to me, and I knew that I should feel similarly about the (from a distance, enchanting) village of Oxoxoco. But I was sick and

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tired, hunted and alone, and I needed repose, because every bone in my body, at every movement, raised its sepulchral protest. But there was to be no rest for me in Oxoxoco.

Once the traveller sets foot in this village, he is affronted by filth and lethargy. The men squat, chin on knee, smoking or sleeping. There is a curious lifelessness about the place as it clings, a conglomeration of hovels, to the upland slope.

There is only one half-solid building in Oxoxoco, the church. My views on religion are tolerably well known, but I made my way to this edifice to be away from the heat, the flies, and the vultures. The church was comparatively cool. Resting, I looked at the painted murals. They simply christen the old, bloody Aztec gods and goddesses, giving them the names of saints, and go on worshipping in the old savage style.

A priest came out to greet me. He radiated benevolence when he saw that I was wearing a complete suit of clothes, a watch-chain, and boots, however down-at-heel.

Knowing that nothing is to be got without ready cash, I gave him half a dollar, saying, "For the poor of your parish. If you will be so good as to direct me to some place where I can find something to eat and drink, I shall be infinitely obliged."

"Diego's widow is clean and obliging," said he, looking at my coin. Then, "You are an American."

"I have that honour."

"Then you will be well advised to move away from here as soon as you have refreshed yourself, because there is a rumour Zapata is coming—or it may be Villa—what do I know?"

"Presumably, the secrets of the Infinite, padre, judging by your cassock. Certainly," I added, "the secrets of Oxoxoco. Now, may I eat and drink and go on my way?"

"I will take you to Diego's widow," said he, with a sign. "Up there—" he pointed to the mountain slope—"you will certainly be safe from Villa, Zapata, and any other man in these parts. No one will go where I am pointing, senor, not the bravest of the brave. They are a superstitious people, my people."

"Not being superstitious yourself, padre, no doubt you have travelled that path?"

"Heaven forbid! You cannot go on foot, senor."

"I'd rather not, padre. But how else should I go?"

His eyes grew bright as he replied, "As luck will have it, Diego's widow has a burro to sell, and he knows the way anywhere. Come with me and I will take you to Diego's widow. She is a virtuous woman, and lives two paces from here."

The sun seemed to flare like oil, and at every step we were beset by clouds of flies which appeared not to bother the good priest who seemed inordinately concerned with my welfare. His "two paces" were more like a thousand, and all the way he catechized me, only partly inspired by personal curiosity.

"Senor, why do you want to go up there? True, you will be safe from bad men. But there are other dangers . . ."

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" If you mean snakes, or what not—" I began.

" Oh no," he replied, " up there is too high for the reptiles and the cats. I see, in any case, that you carry a pistol and a gun. Oh, you will see enough snakes and cats when you pass through the Oxoxoco jungle on your way. That, too, is dangerous; it is unfit for human habitation."

" Padre," said I, " I have lived in London."

Without getting the point of this, he persisted, " It is my duty to warn you, senor—it is very bad jungle. It is not so much the wild beasts as the insects that creep into the eyes, senor, into the ears. They suck blood, they breed fever, they drive men mad—

" Beyond the second bend in the river there are still surviving, unbaptized, certain Indians. They murder strangers slowly, over a slow fire, inch by inch—" His pace lagged as we approached the house of Diego's widow, and he asked me, " Do you understand the nature of a burro, a donkey? "

" Padre, I attended the Kentucky Military Institute."

" I do not grasp your meaning, but they are perverse animals, bless them. Tell them to advance, and they halt. Urge them forward, they go sideways."

" Padre, I was drummer-boy with the Ninth Indiana Infantry."

" Ah well, you will have your way. Here is Diego's widow's house. She is a good woman." And so he led me into a most malodorous darkness, redolent of pigs with an undertone of goat.

The widow of Diego, as the padre had said, was unquestionably a good woman, and a virtuous one. With her looks, how could she have been other than virtuous? She had only three teeth, and was prematurely aged, like all the women hereabout.

As for her cleanliness, no doubt she was as clean as it is possible to be in Oxoxoco. A little pig ran between us as we entered. The padre dismissed it with a blessing, and a hard kick, and said, " Here is a gentleman, my daughter, who requires refreshment and a burro. He is, of course, willing to pay."

" There is no need for that," said the widow of Diego, holding out a cupped hand. When I put a few small pieces of money into her palm she made them disappear like a slot-machine, all the while protesting, " I could not possibly accept," and led me to a pallet of rawhide strips, where I sat nursing my aching head.

Soon she brought me a dish of enchiladas and a little bottle of some spirits these people distil, at a certain season, from the cactus. I ate—although I knew that the hot red pepper could not agree with my asthma; and drank a little, although I was aware that this stuff might be the worst thing in the world for my rheumatism. The flies were so numerous and the air so dense and hot that I felt as one might feel who has been baked in an immense currant bun, without the spice.

She gave me a gourd of goat's milk and, as I drank it, asked me, " The senor wants a burro? I have a burro."

" So the Reverend Father told me, and I hear no good of him."

" I have never seen such a burro," said she. " He is big and

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beautiful—almost as big as a mule—and all white. You can have him for next to nothing. Five silver dollars."

"Come now," I said, "what's wrong with this animal that has all the virtues in the world and goes for next to nothing? I have lived a very long time in all parts of the world, senora, and one thing I have learnt—never trust a bargain. Speak up, what's the matter with the beast? Is he vicious?"

"No, senor, he is not vicious, but the good people in Oxoxoco are afraid of him, and nobody will buy him. They called him a ghost burro, because his hair is white and his eyes and nose are red."

"In other words, an albino donkey," I remarked.

"What need have I for a burro, senor? A few goats, a pig or two, a little corn—what more do I want? Come, you may have him for four dollars, with a halter and a blanket thrown in."

"Well, let me see this famous burro, widow. I have ridden many a ghost in my time, and have been ridden by them in my turn." So she led me to a shady place nearby where stood a large white donkey, or burro as they call them, haltered, still, and seemingly contemplative.

"Where did you get him?" I asked.

The question seemed to embarrass her, but she replied, "He strayed from up there," pointing to the mountain. "No one has claimed him in three years so I have the right to call him mine."

"Well," said I, "I am going up there. No doubt someone will recognize him and claim him, and I'll be short of one donkey. But give me the blanket and the halter, and I will give you three dollars for the lot."

Diego's widow agreed readily. I could see what was passing in her mind: the burro was economically valueless; and if Villa broke through, which seemed likely, his commissariat would take the donkey away to carry ammunition or, perhaps, to eat. She could not hide a donkey, but she could hide three dollars. Hence she produced an old Indian blanket and a rawhide halter. Also she filled my canteen with water and offered me a stirrup-cup of mescal, and pressed into my pockets some cakes wrapped in leaves.

"Vaya con Dios, stranger," she said, "go with God. When you pass the bend in the river and find yourself in the jungle, look to your rifle. But where the path forks, where the trees get thin, turn left, not right."

The Oxoxoco jungle was full of useless forms of life. The trees grew to an immense height, racing neck and neck to the sunlight; meeting overhead, and grappling with one another branch to branch, locked in a stranglehold, careless of the murderous vines that were twining themselves about their trunks and sucking their life-sap while they struggled. There was no light, but there was no shade; only a kind of evil steam. In places I thought I would have to cut my way with my machete, but the donkey seemed to know his way through hopelessly impenetrable places.

He paused, sometimes, to drink out of some little pool or puddle

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that had dripped from the foliage above. But he went on very bravely. I never spent three dollars on a better bargain, and wished that I had not haggled with Diego's widow who, I was by now convinced, was not merely a virtuous woman but a generous one. Or a fool. And I had reason to bless her forethought in filling my canteen with water and my pocket with cakes, because three laborious days passed before the air became sweeter and the vegetation more sparse.

But long before we got out of the jungle I heard myself talking to myself, saying, " So, you old fool, you have got what you deserve. Live alone, die alone . . ." I believe that at last I met my match in piercing acrimony, because I was tongue-tied against my own onslaughts.

Having drunk the last drop of my water—which immediately sprang out again through the pores of my skin—I gave myself up for lost and started to become delirious.

Then, miraculously, there were no more trees, and the air was clean and cold. The white burro broke into a gallop, then a trot, then a walk, and so came to a halt. I raised my drooping head and saw, standing in our path, a tall, lean man dressed in white, holding up a hand in an imperious gesture.

In a sonorous voice he said, " So, you bad burro, you have come home. Well, I will forgive your going astray since you have brought us a guest." Then, to me, in pure Castilian, " Allow me to help you to dismount, senor. I fear you are exhausted."

I managed to croak, in English, " For God's sake, water! "

Mine was the semi-imbecile astonishment of the helplessly played-out man when I heard him reply in perfect English, " Of course, sir. I am extremely thoughtless." I suppose he made some gesture, because two men lifted me very gently and put me in a shady place, while the gentleman in white held to my lips a vessel—not a gourd, but a metal vessel—of pure ice-cold water, admonishing me to drink it slowly.

It revived me wonderfully, and I said, " Sir, you have saved my life, and I am grateful to you—not for that, but for the most delicious drink I have ever tasted."

Then my eyes fell upon the cup from which I had drunk. The outside was frosted, like a julep-cup, but the inside was not. I noticed the colour and the weight of it. It was solid gold.

A servant refilled it from a golden ewer and I drained it again. The gentleman in the white suit said, " Yes, it is very good water. It comes unadulterated from the snows, which are unpolluted. But your voice is familiar to me."

I was travelling incognito, but in courtesy I had to give my host some name to call me by, so I said, " My name is Mark Harte," borrowing from two of my literary contemporaries the Christian name of one and the surname of the other.

Then I fainted, but before I quite lost consciousness I heard the gentleman in the white suit utter some words in a strange language and felt myself, as it were, floating away.

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I know that somebody put to my lips a cup of bitter-tasting effervescent liquid. Curiously happy, I fell into oblivion as lightly as a snowflake falls upon black velvet.

It was one of those sleeps that might last an hour or ten thousand years. When I awoke I was lying on a bed of the most exquisite softness in a cool and spacious chamber simply but luxuriously furnished in a style with which I was unacquainted. My only covering was a white wrapper, or dressing-gown of some soft fabric like cashmere.

On a dressing-table near the window stood a row of crystal bottles with gold stoppers containing what I presumed to be perfumes and lotions.

Above the dressing-table hung a large bevelled mirror in a golden frame, wonderfully wrought in designs which seemed at once strange and familiar. My face, in the mirror, was miserably familiar. But my month-old beard was gone. Only my moustache remained. My hair had been trimmed and dressed exactly as it was before I left San Francisco and came to Mexico to die.

There were bookshelves, too, well filled with a variety of volumes. With a shock of surprise—almost of dismay—I recognized some of my own works.

Upon a low table near the bed stood a golden ewer and cup, and a little golden bell, which I picked up and rang. The door opened and two servants came in carrying between them a table covered with a damask cloth and laid with a variety of dishes, every dish of gold with a gold cover. One of them placed a chair. Another unfolded a snowy napkin which he laid across my knees as I sat. Then he proceeded to lift the covers, while the other brought in a wine-cooler of some rich dark wood curiously inlaid in gold with designs similar to those in the frame of the mirror.

Everything but the wine glasses was of massive gold; and these were of crystal, that beautiful Mexican rock crystal. I picked up a champagne glass and observed that it had been carved out of one piece, as had the hock glass, claret glass, port glass, and liqueur glass. Many months of patient, untiring, and wonderfully skilful craftsmanship must have gone into the making of every piece. Gold never meant much to me, except when I needed it; and such a profusion of it tended even more to debase that metal in my currency. But those wine glasses, carved and ground out of the living crystal, fascinated me.

While I was admiring them, I touched a goblet with a tentative fingernail and was enjoying its melodious vibrations when the sommelier, the wine waiter, went out on tiptoe and returned wheeling a three-tiered wagon, upon every shelf of which was ranged a number of rare wines of the choicest vintages.

It seems that I had touched a sherry glass; in any case he filled the glass I had touched from an old squat bottle. "Hold hard, my friend," I said in Spanish. But he only bowed low and made a graceful gesture towards the glass. I believe that that sherry was

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in the hogshead before Napoleon came to handgrips with the Duke of Wellington at Badajoz. Sherry is the worst thing in the world for rheumatism, and I meant to take no more than one sip. But that one sip filled me so full of sunlight that I felt myself responding to it as if to Spanish music, and my appetite came roaring back. I ate as I had never eaten before. With each course came an appropriate wine.

At last I was served with coffee and brandy. The table was removed. In its place they brought in a low round table, inlaid like the wine-cooler, and upon a great gold tray crystal glasses, a decanter, and all that goes with a Sèvres coffee-pot.

Now my host came in, and I had an opportunity to observe him more closely. "I trust that you have refreshed yourself, Mr. Harte," said he.

I replied, "My dear sir, it is you who have refreshed me. Never have I, in my wildest dreams, imagined such hospitality. I do not know how to thank you."

"You thank me by your presence. You reward me, Mr. Mark Harte. Let us take coffee and cognac together. I hope you slept well. I thought that it might please you, when you awoke, to find yourself looking a little more like the gentleman whose conversation I—inadvertently but with vast pleasure—happened to overhear in the Imperial Café in London, in the spring of 1873; and later at The Ambassador, not many years ago. But do taste this brandy. It was distilled, I think, about the time when Napoleon was a cadet.

Napoleon with his stockings half down
Is in love with Giannaconnetta . . .

You heard the jingle? Yes, Mr. Harte, the wine merchants speak of Napoleon Brandy, but I possess the last few dozen authentic bottles in the world."

"You have been so kind to me," said I, "that I feel bound to tell you—my name is not Mark Harte."

"Oh, but I knew that two days ago—yes, you slept forty-eight hours—and I was quite aware that you were neither Mark Twain, nor Bret Harte, nor any imaginable combination of the two. You are Mr. Ambrose Bierce and, to be frank with you, I would rather have you under my roof than the other two put together."

Always of an irritable turn, though somewhat mellowed by deep rest, good food, and fine wine, I repeated what I must have said elsewhere a thousand times before: that Bret Harte was a cheap slangy upstart who had wheedled his way; and that Sam Clemens (Mark Twain) was better, but not much, or he would never have written such a puerile work as *Huckleberry Finn.*

I drew a deep breath, whereupon one of my asthmatic attacks took hold of me. An asthmatic should know better than to draw a deep breath too suddenly, even when he is about to launch a diatribe against his rivals. A certain mockery pervades such occasions.

You need at least two good lungfuls of air to blow up the epigram, which is, of course, the most brilliant thing that ever came to the

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tip of your tongue. Then your respiratory tracts close as surely as if a Turk had a bow-string about your throat, and the air you have inhaled refuses to come out. Suddenly, you develop the chest of a blacksmith and the complexion of a general. It is at once the most ridiculous and the most wretched of maladies, torturing as it does sufferer and bystander alike.

My host rang the little golden bell and in a moment an old woman came in. He said to her three or four words in that unknown tongue which I had heard before, and she darted away to return with a most curious bottle with three necks, a small gallipot, and a vessel of boiling water. The contents of the gallipot she poured into a hole in the body of the bottle and added what I presumed to be boiling water. Then, inserting two of the necks of the bottle into my nostrils and the middle neck between my lips, she applied her own to the hole in the body of the bottle and blew steadily. I was first aware of something disagreeably pungent. Then the pungency became pleasurable. She withdrew the bottle, and I found myself breathing with a most charming sense of peace.

But my witticisms had been driven completely from my mind.

"It is only asthma," my host said in his powerful but gentle voice. "We can cure you of that, Mr. Bierce."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," I said. I was about to add that, with such a formula, he might make his fortune in the north; but I remembered that profusion of pure gold and said instead, "It was that that drove me here—that and rheumatism. I thought the hot, high, dry air . . ."

My host said, in his gentle voice, "Indeed, yes, Mr. Ambrose Bierce. You are right, as usual—and, as usual, somewhat wrong. Remember your story, entitled *The Damned Thing*, in which you indicate that there are sounds inaudible to the human ear and colours invisible to the human eye? If my memory does not deceive me, you concluded with the words, 'God help me, the Damned Thing is of such a colour!' Correct me if I am wrong. Listen, Mr. Bierce, up here we can hear the high and the low, the squeak of the bat and the rumblings under the earth; and we know, believe me, we know."

His eyes were like coals, but his face was bland as he said, "What do you know, Mr. Ambrose Bierce? . . . Let us change the subject. Tell me of your experiences in the Oxoxoco jungle. Were you troubled?"

"Excepting hunger and thirst," I said, "not a bit. Once or twice I thought I saw some red-brown faces peering at me, but then they disappeared almost as if they were afraid of me."

My host laughed, and said, "Do forgive me, Mr. Bierce. Those savages were not afraid of you, they were afraid of Tonto."

"I thought it might have been my guns that frightened them, sir. But who is Tonto?"

"Tonto is a Spanish word meaning silly, irresponsible, stupid. It is the name of the burro upon which you rode here—and for bringing you I will forgive all that perverse donkey's sins. Allow

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me to assure you, however, that if you had been riding any ordinary ass, both you and it, by now, would have been butchered, eaten, and forgotten. Thank Tonto. When those jungle beasts see one of my white burros—and they know them, the dogs—they hide their heads."

Then he mused, "Tonto was always a curiously rebellious animal. That is why we call him, Tonto. Cross-grained. A donkey is not called a donkey without reason, sir." He laughed. "It would be no use beating him even if I were so disposed. One must earn the affection of a donkey or a mule; otherwise he will stand and be beaten to death rather than take an order. Not that I have ever beaten beast or man. We are humane here, sir, and loathe violence. Mr. Bierce, sir, let it be quite plain that you do here as you will."

"I like that donkey, or burro," I said. "Somehow I find him sympathetic."

"Then he is yours," said my host.

After some interchange of courtesies, I remarked, "Here is something I do not understand, sir: you live here in the wilds, near a jungle inhabited by savages. Yet you live in a magnificent stone house, attended by servants who would be worth their weight in gold even in Mexico City. I speak of gold—you eat off gold platters, drink out of gold cups or glasses of pure rock crystal. You are an accomplished man; you speak several languages with remarkable purity. This, I do not understand."

"Mr. Bierce, I am the head of a very ancient family, possibly the most ancient family extant. No, wait! I see, springing to your lips, an inquiry unworthy of you, which would not do justice to me. Did I come over with the Conquistadores? Were my predecessors with Cortez? The answer is, no.

"Then you will ask whether my forebears, the ancient Aztecs, came up here to escape from the Spaniards and their horses. Sir, you may believe me when I tell you that the Aztecs were mere upstarts by my family reckoning. The very house in which I have the honour of sheltering you is almost as old as the pyramids in Yucatan. Do not speak to me, sir, of the Aztecs. Without entering into detail, they were a foolish people, though numerous.

"My people were kings, sir, before the Aztecs crept out of the jungle. The little they knew of architecture, carving, and so forth, they derived from us. You have seen the Yucatan pyramids? Have you ever seen anything so crude? The Aztec carvings? Put your fingers in the corners of your mouth, pull, and roll your eyes. They are out of drawing, too, if you observe the limbs . . .

"Now this house is made of volcanic rock—fused by the fires that die not—cut in cubes, mathematically precise, each side of the cube as long as my stride, about thirty-two inches. No baking, no plastering. It is not a house, humble though it may seem to you, it is an ancient jewel. The pyramids of Egypt themselves would, on analysis, look foolish beside this little house . . .

"Now you will ask me about gold. Sir, Mr. Bierce, we have

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almost inexhaustible funds of gold, and take it for granted. In effect, we of the Old People scarcely regard it except as a medium of exchange . . . and for certain other purposes. Personally, for utility, I prefer silver. Silver, I find, is lighter and more agreeable. And while I drink out of crystal—my men grind it to its proper proportions with wet sand, as the Chinese shape jade—I prefer a mixture of silver, gold, and copper for my dishes. This is firmer than tedious gold. I would like to make an admixture with tin, which might be a very good thing. But I bore you."

"I assure you, not in the least, sir," I said. "I was only about to remark that you seem to have travelled greatly. You say that you have seen me in London, in San Francisco, and—"

"Why not, Mr. Bierce? Necessarily so, sir. You may have observed that we live here in something of a civilized way. You took, and I hope you enjoyed, champagne with your meal. Where does it come from? Necessarily, France. How do I get it? Very simple; I exchange gold, of which I have an immense supply. There you have it."

"But, my dear sir, you are a man of the world. It seems to me," said I, "that you speak every language fluently, even including languages I have never heard spoken."

"Oh, I move here and there as necessity dictates. But this is my home. Not only do I speak languages, Mr. Bierce; I speak accents and dialects." Then he made a chewing motion with his jaws, let the right-hand side of his mouth droop loosely, and spoke in the accents of a Calaveras prospector and pretended to spit as he said, "Mr. Ambrose Bierce, sir. Me and my folks sure would admire to have you for supper."

I replied, in the same intonation, "Yes, sir, you bet!"

We shook hands in the California style. His handshake was exploratory—he seemed to be feeling my hand joint by joint. Said he, "But we were speaking of rheumatism. We can first alleviate, then cure that. Nothing simpler, if you overcome your modesty."

"My modesty apart, what is your process?"

My host said, "There are two processes. The preliminary process is a form of massage. You have been massaged, no doubt, by shampooers in Turkish baths and Hummums in various cities. But only by ten fingers. Now my masseuses have seventy fingers. That is to say, there are seven of them. Each takes a joint, a muscle, or a place where certain nerves cross. The seven women —I am sorry, but only women can do it—work at the same time, in perfect co-ordination. They were trained from childhood, bred to the business. They will prepare you for the second treatment, which is sonic."

"Sonic? That, sir, should pertain to sound."

"Just so, Mr. Bierce. My masseuses will prepare you for the sound treatment that will take away the crystals that come between certain joints and fibres, and make you uncomfortable. With all your perspicacity you do not understand? Here, I'll demonstrate."

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This extraordinary man picked up a crystal water glass, and threw it down. It bounced—while I winced—and rocked itself still, undamaged. He picked it up and set it on the low table, saying, "To all intents and purposes, Mr. Bierce, apart from a sudden shock this crystal is indestructible. But observe me closely." While I watched, he rang the glass with a fingernail.

It gave out a gloriously melodious note, somewhere in the scale of D major.

He listened intently; then, filling his lungs, which were the enormous lungs of a man who lives in the rarefied air of the uplands, he sang into the glass precisely the same note. Only that one note, and he sang it with tremendous volume and power. The glass quivered, appeared to dance, then suddenly fell to pieces.

He said, "One must take into consideration the natural cohesion of particles. The particles, or atoms, of all matter, living or dead, are obedient to certain natural laws of cohesion. They respond to their own vibrations, Mr. Bierce. By means of sound, and sound alone, I could, for example, have made that glass very light or very heavy.

"When you are relaxed, almost inert, I will find the right vibration and, by the proper application of sound, I will break the tiny nodules and disperse the antagonistic acids that cause you so much pain. With your permission, let it be understood, not without."

"If you can rid me, sir, of these aches and pains as you have rid me of this asthmatic attack, you have my permission to do anything."

He rang the little golden bell. To the manservant who came in immediately he gave an order in that tantalizingly familiar, yet utterly foreign, tongue of the household.

Then he said to me in his impeccable English, "I must ask you, if you will be so kind, to remove your robe. I may say, by the by, that the clothes in which you came have been cleaned and mended, so that they are as good as new; your boots likewise. They are in the cupboard by the door, together with your gun, your revolver, and your machete. Understand me; it is my desire that you be perfectly content. You have only to express a wish and it will be granted. You may think this odd, Mr. Bierce?"

"Delightfully so," I said.

"Yes, by common standards it is. But I am of the Old People, and we live by the spirit of the great. I have sent out messages, north, south, east, and west, to my scattered family. They will assemble here in a month, and then—"

Eight women had come into the room. An anthropologist would have been hard put to it to define their race. Presumably their heads had been bound at birth, because their skulls were curiously conical. Their faces were of the neutral colour of weak coffee, and quite expressionless.

While I lay on the bed, seven of them took positions round me. The eighth carried a golden bowl of some kind of aromatic oil, which she offered to the others who steeped their hands in it.

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Then began the massage as my host had explained it—inch by inch, line by line, nerve by nerve, and muscle by muscle—seventy skilled fingers working in perfect co-ordination.

There used to be a masseur with a red beard in the Turkish bath at Covent Garden whom I regarded as a master of his profession. He could take away indigestion, muscular pains, or a headache simply by the application of his supple and intelligent hands. His name was Jim. Any one of these seven women was worth ten Jims. I had been tolerably comfortable before they went to work. But they brought to me a sense of tranquillity of which I should never have thought myself capable.

I fell asleep while they were still working. How long they worked I do not know, but the sun was setting when I woke, and I was hungry and thirsty again. I rang my little bell and the two men who had previously attended me came in, this time with a larger table which they set for two.

My host dined with me, anticipating my every want. "With this meal," he explained, "you may eat only white meats—merely poultry of various sorts, unborn veal, fish, omelets. Hence, only white wine. Because, after an hour for digestion and a good cigar, you must come with me and we will complete the treatment. There will be no more rheumatism, no more arthritis, no more gout.

"Believe me, Mr. Bierce, we live by the spirit here; and once purged of pain and hate, relieved of the necessity to earn a living, yours is the greatest spirit of the age, and I want you to become one of us. We will make you perfect."

It was in my heart to say that I did not want to be perfect; that perfection is for saints and gods, and I had no ambition in that direction; for they used to call me "Bitter" Bierce, not without reason. Certain souls thrive on bitter fruit; only fools love sugar, only madmen hope for perfection. But I was too comfortable to argue the point, and my host had been more than kind to me. I may have been born a farmer's boy, but I have some of the instincts of a gentleman.

"A cigar, if you will, but no brandy until later. Then, anything you like. Later, nothing will hurt you, Mr. Bierce. I have had a steer killed, and the filet hung; likewise a five-year-old sheep, well fed, well penned, well killed. We shall eat the saddle . . ."

So eventually, having dressed me in a suit similar to his own, he led me through a labyrinth of corridors, down and down from door to door, into the bowels of the mountain, and there we came into a great cave. One might put St. Paul's Cathedral into the dome of St. Peter's, Rome; but St. Peter's itself would have been lost in the vastness of that cave. It was occupied by something, the sight of which impelled me to ask, "Is this an organ, sir?"

"An organ of a kind," said my host, "but of such a kind that I venture to say its like will never be seen again. I suppose you know that the Indians in Yucatan have what they call water-pipes.

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These are a series of pottery jars of varying sizes, to the tops of which are attached a certain kind of whistle. By means of a primitive sort of spigot they regulate a flow of water into the largest jar, first of all. The rising water compresses the air which, being forced out through the whistle, makes a certain sound. Meantime the water, having reached a certain level, pours into the next jar, and so on until the air is full of mysterious music.

"It must be," he mused, "a race memory. Crude, yes; primitive, unquestionably. But derived from the Old People, who used sound in its proper application before Atlantis sank into the sea.

"Now these things which seem to you to be the pipes of some colossal organ are water-pipes. They are grey with the incrustations of age, but they are mostly of pure gold. The largest one, which is about the size of five hogsheads, is of massive gold. The next is of silver. The following five are of gold and bronze. There are ninety-three in all.

"You yourself, Mr. Bierce, have written of colours the human eye cannot see, and sounds the human ear cannot hear. You cannot hear the great pipe because it is too deep; and you cannot hear the ninety-third pipe, which is thinner than a pencil, because its note is higher than the squeak of a bat . . . Now you must take off your clothes and lie down on this pallet. Shut your eyes, open your mouth, and wait until I control the flow."

I asked, "What happens?"

"There are sounds which it is not vouchsafed to man to hear, Mr. Bierce. You won't hear them—you will scarcely feel them. Breathe deeply, and let us have done with discussion. Listen, and tell me what you hear."

"I hear," I said, "a pouring of water. A tinkling of water conjoined to something strangely compounded of melody and thunder."

"Aha! The great pipe fills. Now wait—"

My host held to my lips that bitter, effervescent drink which I so clearly remembered, and then as it were through a veil I sensed an agreeable numbness while, from basso to alto, the pipes made their music.

I felt them rather than heard them. The first sensation was in the back of my head, in my cerebellum; then it was in my wrists and my elbows, my hips and knees and ankles. Soon this fabulous vibration, controlled by my host, as it seemed took hold of the front of my throat. If I had possessed the will of ten men I could not have resisted this spell. It is not that I swooned—I very gently became unconscious. It is common knowledge that I am a man of a certain strength of will: I held on to my senses as long as I could; was aware of strange vibrations in all my joints; and finally floated out of the world in a black sleep.

The last thing I remember in this gigantic cave was the intolerably thin whistle of the smallest pipe, queerly compounded with the dull thunder of the great pipe. It was as if I were melting.

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" —We only want your spirit," said my host.

I could not speak, but I remember saying within myself, " I hope you may get it."

Soon the music died. All I could hear was a sound of water running away. Somebody wrapped me in a soft blanket and I was carried away again, back through those labyrinthine passages to my bedroom, where I fell into a profound slumber. I did not wake until about noon next day.

One of my silent attendants led me to a bath of warm water delicately perfumed with something like sandalwood. Again, I had been shaved while I slept. He had laid out a fresh white suit, a fine silk shirt, and a black cravat. Studs, cuff-links, and tie-pin were of matched pearls. He was setting the table again, so that I had my choice of a dozen dishes.

My host came in when I was dressed. " Now, Mr. Bierce," said he, " confess that our treatment is efficacious."

" I never felt so well in all my life."

" I daresay not. And you will feel better yet. We shall not need to repeat yesterday's treatment. Only, after you have taken luncheon and rested a little, I might advise the use of the bottle again. Two or three repetitions, and there will be an end to your asthma.

" Your rheumatism, sir, you may regard as cured for ever; but if you will allow me I shall have the Seven Sisters repeat the massage every night before you retire, to make you plump and supple. Repose, repose—refresh, refresh!

" Pray be seated with a good appetite. Will you take a glass of sherry with me? . . . Aha—here, I see, is this saddle of mutton. You must try it: It is of Welsh breed. Do you prefer capers or red currant jelly? You must eat, Mr. Bierce, and relax, and be happy. Soon my family (what is left of it) will be here, and then we shall have a real feast, and you shall be one with us. Allow me to serve you . . ."

After we had drunk each other's health he left me. The mutton was excellent. I also ate something which, if it was not real Stilton cheese matured with port, was remarkably like it.

I opened the cupboard by the door and there, indeed, were my old clothes rejuvenated. But they had thrown away my old straw sombrero, and replaced it with a magnificent Panama lined with green silk. There was my gun cleaned and oiled, and my revolver too; both fully loaded. My machete stood in its scabbard, but they had burnished the leather with a bone, as soldiers burnish their bayonet scabbards, so that it shone like glass.

For my convenience my host had placed next to it a walking stick of some rare jungle vine with a handle of pure gold in the form of a lizard with emeralds for eyes. So I put on my hat and picked up the stick and prepared to go for a walk.

An attendant conducted me into the open. The air was keen and refreshing. Far below lay the dense and fetid jungle; but up here everything was sweet and fresh. I saw that the house, although it

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was only one storey high, covered an immense area. Some distance away there stood a smaller, somewhat humbler house which, as I guessed, was for the servants. Beyond there were erected other buildings, all of that ancient, diamond-hard volcanic stone. From one of these buildings came the braying of an ass. I strolled over.

There were horses and mules, all white; and, segregated, a number of white burros, all beautifully clean and well fed. I called, "Hullo there, Tonto!" and sure enough, my old friend that I had bought for three dollars, blanket and halter and all, came running towards me to be stroked.

I spoke to him with affection. "Well, Tonto, old friend," said I, "I believe I owe you a debt of gratitude, little burro, because you certainly did me a good turn when you brought me here. Yes, Tonto, you and I must have something in common. A restlessness, eh? Eh, Tonto? A misanthropy? Which, I wonder, is the donkeyest donkey of us two? You must be an ass, you know, to run away from a cosy crib like this to go to Oxoxoco—however virtuous Diego's widow may be. Hasta luego, my friend; hasta la vista, Tonto."

Then I went slowly back to the house, twirling my stick.

But I was aware of a vague disquiet, which I could not define. My host was waiting for me. He, too, was wearing a Panama hat, but the handle of his walking stick was of a translucent glowing red. He saw my curious glance and said, "It is cut out of a solid ruby. In Paris, say, a ruby like this would be worth a fortune. Here, its value is merely symbolical. Let us exchange walking sticks. Carry it in good health, I beg." He took away my gold-headed stick and pressed into my hand the ruby-headed one. I have seen rubies one-twentieth of the size that were valued at ten thousand dollars.

Then, with many compliments, and followed by the two attendants, he conducted me to my room, saying, "You must rest. Yesterday's treatment shakes the very fabric of one's being. You have lived in England; have you acquired the English habit of taking afternoon tea? In any case, it shall be sent up, with buttered toast and cinnamon buns. I want to see you plump and hearty, Mr. Bierce, solid and vital, bursting with life. You must not over-exert yourself."

"I was not, sir. I was only making my courtesies to the burro that brought me here."

"Ah, little Tonto? He is an unpredictable burro, that one; temperamental, spasmodically seized with an itch to travel. Please rest, and if there is anything at all that you desire, you have only to ring the bell. But before you lie down—" he beckoned and an attendant brought a cup of that bitter, effervescent stuff—"drink this. It relaxes the nerves, it is good for the blood, and improves the appetite. In a manner of speaking, it loosens and clarifies the spirit."

I drank it, and lay down. But even as the soporific effect of that

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draught took hold, disquietude came back. I was on the verge of sleep when I sat up and snapped my fingers, having hit upon the cause of it.

Simply, I was too contented—a condition to which I was unaccustomed, and which aroused in me the direst suspicions. Maddeningly incomplete yet indescribably sinister thoughts passed through my mind. In spite of the comforts with which I was surrounded, and the charming courtesy and respect with which I was treated, I felt that something, somewhere, was wrong—wrong in a mad, unearthly way.

However, I slept very peacefully and awoke only when the seven masseuses and their cup-bearer came in. Again, when I was massaged and dressed, the attendants brought the table and my host came in, smiling.

" I will wager," said he, " that you feel as you look—thirty years younger. I am delighted to see you looking so well, and I hope that you will do justice to the filet. My little herd is of interesting stock, part Hereford, part Scottish. I keep it only for my table, of course."

" I have the appetite of an ostrich," said I, " and his digestion, too. I am sure that I am getting fat."

" By the time the rest of my family are gathered here you will be in perfect condition, Mr. Bierce. Then we will have a true banquet—" He stopped himself abruptly and added, "—of the spirit, of the spirit." He looked at me with curious intensity and begged me to try an avocado pear with a particularly rich and savoury stuffing.

In spite of my nameless misgivings I ate like a fifteen-year-old boy. My host dined with me; but he seemed to be beset with a kind of neurasthenic lassitude.

He said, " I am in low spirits this evening. Yes, I am in need of spiritual refreshment . . . Ah well, it will not be long now." And he poured me a glass of that superlative cognac, saying, " I will take one glass with you, and then I must sleep. You must rest, too. In a little while they will bring you your draught, and so, good night and pleasant dreams to you."

But I did not drink my draught that night. I was weary of idleness and contentment, and wanted to think. I drowsed a little, however, and should eventually have slept—but then a frightful thought occurred to me. It jerked me like a hooked fish, cold and wet with panic, into bright consciousness.

I remembered what my host had said when he had imitated the accents of the California squatter, *Me and my folks sure would admire to have you for supper,* and the peculiar expression of veiled mockery that flashed across his face when he said it.

Then, I remembered all his talk about the banquet, the impending " feast of the spirit," and I recalled again certain cannibalistic practices of some ancient races who believe that, partaking of a portion of the flesh of a dead friend or enemy, they absorb some of his spiritual and intellectual attributes. And now I began to

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understand the deadly terror in which the people up here were regarded. Also I perceived for the first time the nature of the pleasant-smelling oil with which I had been so carefully shampooed; I detected in its odour thyme, sage, basil, marjoram, hyssop, and mint—herbs, in fact, which belong not to the art of healing, but to the art of cookery. This was enough . . .

So, to clear my thoughts and to pass the time, I wrote the above in my notebook. I propose, in case I am caught and searched, to roll these thin pages into a tight little scroll and put it where no one will ever think of looking for it—into one of the necks of the inhaler-bottle which stands on my dressing-table.

Then I will put on my own clothes, take up my old arms, go to the stable, and call the burro, Tonto. He found his way to Oxoxoco once; he may do so again. One thing is certain: no savage will touch me while I am mounted on his back. And once in the jungle, given a three hours' start, I shall have nothing but thirst to fear.

I am reluctant to leave the stick with the ruby head but, although I was born an Ohio farmer's boy, nevertheless I trust I have the instincts of a gentleman. In any case, with my other equipment, I shall find it inconvenient to carry. The moon is setting.

Gun, revolver, machete, canteen; and then, to horse.

(Signed) Ambrose Bierce, May (?) 1914

And that is the manuscript that was found in the Oxoxoco bottle. The authorities have been reluctant to publicize it for fear of a hoax. The farce of the Piltdown skull still rankles in many academic minds.

But, in my opinion, it is genuine. The holograph is undoubtedly in Ambrose Bierce's writing. The reason that it is no longer the writing of an old man may be that he was relieved of his rheumatism up there, when the man in the white suit was making him " perfect " for the ghoulish " spiritual supper."

But exactly how one of the greatest American writers of his time died we still do not know. It may be—I hope not—that they pursued him and led him and Tonto back. It may be that he died in the jungle. It may be that he reached Oxoxoco and there—as is generally believed—was shot by Pancho Villa.

One thing is certain; that the gentleman in the white suit, his house, his riches, and his tribe were wiped out when Popocatepetl erupted some years later, and now are covered by an unknown depth of hard volcanic rock, so that no solution is to be looked for there.

Still, I am convinced that this is the only authentic account of the last days of " Bitter " Ambrose Bierce. © Gerald Kersh 1957

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TAXING OCCUPATION

An income is what you can't live without or within.

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CARAVANSERAI

It was as if he had been expecting me

BY CHRISTOPHER LANDON

IN the bad weather of December last winter, I had to go up to town for one of those endless conferences at the film studio. I didn't want to go: I didn't relish leaving Joan alone in the cottage in the wilds of Kent with only the dog for company, but she insisted that she would be all right so, reluctantly, I went.

The conference dragged on all day, and it was after seven before I was clear of London. An hour later, somewhere near Tonbridge, the snow really started to come down hard. I pulled in to a pub, and tried to get through to the cottage on the phone, but the operator said the number was unobtainable: the line was down. I had a quick scotch and decided to push on regardless.

The traffic was thinner now, but the snow grew worse. It was terribly cold in the car, even with the heater going full blast. It needed all my concentration to find the way ahead: then suddenly everything cleared, and I was alone on the silent, white, deserted road, running under a star-spangled sky for the last stretch home.

This last stretch was the fastest of the whole trip: straight, undulating, without a village or a crossing for ten miles or more. I could relax a bit, and do what I should have done a long time before—take a look at the instrument panel.

The needle of the petrol gauge was steady, not even flickering at the mark of *Empty*.

I cursed, and dropped my speed, trying to coast down all the hills, but the thick carpet of snow didn't help. There wasn't a hope of getting home; for when the needle was steady, it meant what it said. Then I remembered the garage.

I suppose I used to pass it about once a week, usually at about seventy, always with a vaguely guilty feeling that no one ever seemed to stop there, that I must pull in there the next time, when I wasn't in such a hurry, and take on a tankful of petrol. But, somehow, I never did.

It was no more than a tin shanty, set back from the road on a cinder turn-in, with one forlorn, hand-operated pump that was flanked by piles of empty, rusting tins. There was never a sign

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of life: the whole place had the hopeless, dejected look of a chronic invalid who has given up the struggle. Well, now was the chance to make amends . . .

I came over the next hill-crest praying that the engine would not die on me, and hoping there would be some sign of life at the side of the road. Yes . . . There, on the left, in about the right spot, was one small pinpoint of light. I was going to be lucky.

I coasted down and turned in—the tyres making no sound on the thick carpet of unmarked snow. When I had switched off, a deep, compelling silence flooded down on the car, and I thought for a minute that I had been wrong—the place was derelict. But there on one side was the faint reflection on the snow of a light from a window. I got out, trod carefully round to the door that was beside it, and knocked.

There was a long pause, and then it opened slowly. A very tall, thin man was looking out at me, holding a guttering hurricane lamp high above his head. He was wearing dungarees, and there was a blue muffler round his neck: he did not look cold, but somehow I *knew* that he was very thinly clad.

The lamp was in his right hand; the left, thrust deep into his trouser-pocket.

"Yes."

There was no query in the tone. It was as if he had been expecting me.

"I'm sorry to beat you up at this time of night—but I'm right out of petrol."

He lowered the lamp. "I've a couple of gallons in a can somewhere, if that would help?" The voice was very soft, gentle. Now I was used to the light, I could see the white, scanty hair, the sunken cheeks, the dark brooding eyes.

"I'd like a tankful from the pump, if I may," I said quickly.

"None there. It's dry. They won't deliver except for cash." There was no bitterness in the tone: just a statement of accepted fact.

"Then I had better take the can." I was horribly embarrassed, but he did not seem to notice it.

He nodded, and put the lamp down in the doorway, and went into the back room, coming out with a two-gallon can. I squelched beside him through the snow to watch as, in silence, he tipped the contents of the can into the filler hole with swift, expert ease—it was all done with one hand. The other, the left one, was deep into his trouser-pocket as he said, "That's the lot—that'll see you home. Come inside for a minute. It's warmer."

The room at the back was an untidy jumble of domestic

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furniture, spare parts, and old tyres. Above the tang of the kerosene from the hurricane lamp, the damp, metallic smell of all the garages in the world seeped over everything. The tall man put the lamp down carefully.

" The kettle's on the boil. Time for a cup of tea."

It would have been churlish to refuse after his help. When I said it would be nice, he just nodded, and went out of another door to what must have been the kitchen. While I waited, I went through my pockets to try to find the right change for the petrol. I hadn't enough, so I took out a pound note. As I went over to put it on the table, I noticed the open book of poetry for the first time.

It was a translation of Hafiz, the famous Persian. Somehow it seemed out of place there in that dingy, smelly little room. I picked it up, and saw that it was open at that lovely poem, *Love's Awakening*.

I began to read the words silently to myself, when the gentle voice came over my shoulder . . . cutting in at the exact place I had reached.

Within life's caravanserai,
what brief security have I,
when momently the bell doth cry,
Bind on your loads: the hour is nigh!

I jumped a little, and turned. He was standing just behind me, holding a mug of tea in his right hand. " This will do you good," he said.

" What about you? " He shook his head and murmured something about having had enough already.

While I sipped we talked a little of Hafiz and the other Persian poets, and it was with real regret that I had at last to put down my mug and say I must be pushing on. " Take for the petrol and the tea from this," I said, holding out the pound note.

He shook his head with the same gentle, sad movement. " Can't do it, sir. No change. Not a copper in the place. Bring it in any time."

" No, you keep it. I'll come in the next time I'm by."

" I'd rather you brought it in. It's a pleasure to have a chat with someone . . . when you're all on your own."

He did not come out to see me off, but stood holding the lamp high until I was in the car and had started the engine. A mile on, at the crest of the hill, I looked back for a moment, and the single pinpoint of light was still burning steadily in the darkness.

Even when I was safe and warm in bed, I could not help lying

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awake and thinking about our strange meeting. The next morning was clear and frosty, and no more snow had fallen. It was when I went to the garage to take out the car that the first feeling of disquiet became sharp and clear.

The needle of the petrol gauge remained obstinately at *Empty*. I had done only ten miles since I had left my friend, and I couldn't, just couldn't, have used two gallons. I made an excuse to Joan and went off to find him, having filled up at the local garage.

There had been no fresh snow on the road, and very little traffic, either. I could even follow my own track of the night before. The garage looked still and silent when I pulled in beside the pump, but it was not until I was out of the car, and had started walking towards the back of his tin shanty that something stopped me short in my tracks. There was only one set of footprints already impressed in the snow in front of me: they went to the back of the shack and then returned to the pull-in.

I turned and fitted my foot in carefully. They were mine. There was no sign of those of the man who had helped me.

It took a long time to pluck up enough courage to go on round to the back to see for myself. But when I had braced myself to it, there was nothing: no sign of life; no answer to my shouts; the windows, too grimy to look through; the door, padlocked.

There was a pub, three miles along the road, that I had been in once and did not like, but it was the only way to find out . . .

As I sipped my bitter, I said as casually as I could to the landlord, " Do you know where I can find the owner of the garage down the road? I owe him some money, but there doesn't seem to be anyone about."

He wiped down the counter slowly. " There won't be . . . any more. He's dead, sir. He was broke, almost starving. He cut his wrist with a razor. But how can you expect the end will be otherwise than that for someone who reads fancy stuff all day long, and never gives a thought to his proper business? "

I tried to keep my voice steady. " Then he did it last night? "

" Last night, sir? " The landlord stared at me. " No." His gaze grew more searching as he fixed his eyes on me, curiously. " No, it was last Thursday week."

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* * *

ARGOSY FOR H.M. FORCES

When you have read this copy of ARGOSY, why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?

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MOONSTRUCK

The golden disc shot heavenwards, and set course for Venus

BY E. L. MALPASS

LOW above the steaming jungle of Wales, the golden Saucer skimmed. The crew jettisoned their bomb. It fell, rolled a little, lay still.

Two aggrieved dinosaurs, running to get out of its way, turned and looked at it sourly. First, the sabre-toothed tiger, and now this! Life wasn't going to be worth living soon, they decided.

The Saucer hovered. "Looks peaceful enough," grumbled the pilot. "I don't know what we have to drop a bomb here for."

"You wait a few million years, till it's due to go off," explained the navigator. "It won't be so peaceful then. They'll be just about ready to start making a nuisance of themselves on the other planets." He laughed unkindly. "But they won't get a chance. That thing'll blow them sky high before they start."

"Trust the Old Man to do things in plenty of time," complained the pilot. He looked at the windscreen. "Starting to rain. We'd better be getting back," he said.

The lovely golden disc shot heavenwards, and set course for Venus. Earth lay silent, not knowing, not caring, what had just been dropped into her lap.

And on the sleek, golden surface of the bomb, the steady rain began to fall.

Millenniums later, Willie Evans found the bomb; working on the coal face he was, and broke his pick on it.

Quite a time it took him to get it free. And when he did, he gazed at it with disappointment. Just a black, egg-shaped contraption, not much good to anyone by the look of it.

But then an exciting thing happened. He rubbed it with his sleeve; there was a gleam of gold—gold shining through the dirt of centuries. As soon as the shift ended, Willie was off home, the bomb tucked proudly under his arm.

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Now Willie was one of those nice, quiet boys with curly black hair and a fresh complexion. Cheerful, too. When he walked home from the pit, all the girls would look at him with interest. Especially Cerigwen Rees. But he never gave them a chance. He was too shy, see.

The bomb, however, seemed to break down reserve. It gave people an opening for conversation. Even Dai Full Back fell into step beside him and asked, "What you got there, Willie?"

Willie, hurrying home to show the bomb to his mother, said, "It's my contraption. Found it in the pit, see."

Dai looked at it with interest. "What you reckon it is?" he asked. "Could be made of gold, couldn't it?"

"Don't know," said Willie.

Owen Price Confectionery was standing in the doorway of his shop. Normally he was much too grand to waste time trying to chip through Willie's reserve, and him Chairman of the Hospital Fête Committee and all; but tonight he called out, "What you got there, Willie?"

Willie was too nervous to speak to Mr. Price. He just stood there and grinned, like a shy mother showing her first baby to the Minister.

Willie walked on. Soon he had quite a crowd with him. Never had he been so popular. But then, suddenly, his knees turned to water. He began to sweat and gasp for breath, for coming up the street towards him was Cerigwen Rees. And Cerigwen always had this strange effect on Willie.

Oh, but beautiful this girl was. Like a starlit night, Willie thought her, with her black hair and brilliant eyes. And she was kind, and gentle, and friendly. But when a man like Dai Full Back was around, Willie didn't expect anyone to notice *him*. Least of all Cerigwen Rees.

Up the narrow street she came, her wide, flowered skirt swinging, her heels clattering on the cobbles. Just a bit larger than life, Cerigwen seemed. And Willie felt quite a bit smaller. He effaced himself. He lowered his eyes. He did not want to see her face light up when she saw Dai Full Back.

He heard cheerful familiar greetings between Dai and Cerigwen, and he wished he were at home with his mam. He wished he were dead. Oh, Cerigwen, Cerigwen, his heart cried, couldn't you spare me just one little word?

And then the miracle happened. "Taking up Rugby football in your old age, is it?" asked an amused, kindly voice.

A great hope surged up in Willie. Cerigwen was speaking to him. But he dared not lift his eyes from the pavement.

And then the scornful voice of Dai said, "Never mind his

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old contraption, girl. What about the pictures tonight, eh?"

But a line of skirt came between Willie's downcast eyes and the pavement; and Cerigwen, standing so close that he could smell the sweetness of her, Cerigwen took the contraption in her arms, and said, "Well, there is heavy it is. Stronger you must be than you look, Willie Evans."

At that Willie dared to look into her eyes. "Wiry, my mam says I am," he announced with a sort of defiant pride.

Dai gave a snort of laughter.

Cerigwen spun round on him. "Lucky it is we are not all fifteen stone," she said angrily. "And you can keep your old pictures. I am taking my dad round to see Willie's contraption tonight, for sure. Very interested in anything scientific, my dad is."

And she accompanied the delighted Willie to his gate. "Clean it up, Willie," she said as she left him. "A rich man you will be if there is gold under all that dirt."

"What you got there, Willie?" asked his mam when he came into the kitchen.

"Dug it out the coal face," said Willie. "And Price Confectionery joked me about it coming home." But the wonderful fact that Cerigwen Rees had spoken to him, he hugged to himself.

"Well, I never," said Mrs. Evans. "Talking to Mr. Price! Giving you first prize for your Napoleon at the Hospital Fête on Saturday he will be."

Willie put the bomb down on the table. His mam looked at it critically. "I will try a bit of metal polish after tea," she said.

Usually after tea they sat, one on each side of the fire, while Mrs. Evans knitted, and Willie tried to count up to a million before supper. Bit dull it was, sometimes.

But tonight was wonderfully different. Mam got out the metal polish and worked away at the bomb until you could see your face in it. Willie watched her admiringly, sick with excitement at the thought that Cerigwen might call. Then they spent a happy time seeing where it looked best. Finally they decided to leave it on the dresser, under the big picture of the late Mr. Evans in his Buffalo's outfit. Shining and golden, it seemed to fill the whole kitchen with cheerful radiance.

"Nice, isn't it," said Willie's mam. And at that moment a knock came at the door.

No one ever called to see them in the evening. Mrs. Evans whipped off her apron, and Willie went to the door. "Good evening, Mrs. Price," he said. "Are you coming in?"

Mrs. Price came in. She went up to the bomb. "Is that

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Willie's contraption?" she asked. "Nice, isn't it? Fancy, Willie, having a contraption!"

By eight o'clock there were a dozen visitors in the room gazing, entranced and silent, at the mirror-like surface of the bomb. Mrs. Evans had never spent such a delightful evening. At half past eight Willie's gnawing fears were laid to rest. Cerigwen, looking strangely demure, arrived with her father.

Very clever, Mr. Rees was. Educated, too. He had read right through the Encyclopedia as far as Vesuvius. Now he picked up the bomb, and examined it through a lens, and looked knowing, while Willie and Cerigwen sat in wonderful communion on the sofa.

"What you reckon it is, Da?" asked Cerigwen at last. "Is it gold?"

Mr. Rees tapped the bomb with his pince-nez. "Difficult to say without extensive tests, Cerigwen girl. But I have my theories. I must have a word with my friend, Dr. Birkinshaw." And he hurried importantly from the house.

But the excitement was not over yet, not by a long way. For when, at last, all the visitors but Cerigwen had torn themselves away, there was the sound of a motor car stopping outside, and a loud rat-a-tat on the front door. Willie and his mam looked at each other in wild surmise.

"I'll go," said Willie. He opened the door, and who should be standing there but Dr. Birkinshaw!

"Hullo, Willie," he said, marching in. "What on earth's all this about your finding something in the pit? Mr. Rees has been telling me. Had to come and see for myself."

Dr. Birkinshaw went straight up to the bomb. "This it?" he barked. "God bless my soul, what is it?" He picked it up, shook it, held it to his ear. "You actually dug that up?"

"Broke my pick on it," said Willie.

"Can I take it? This ought to go to London for examination."

"London!" breathed Cerigwen, a strange light in her eyes.

But Willie looked at the doctor piteously. He was faced with an awful decision. Then he put out his hands and took the bomb in his arms. "No," he stammered. "Fond of it I am, see."

"Oh well." The doctor shrugged. "I can't make you. But you've not heard the last of this, mind. Shouldn't be surprised if you don't wake up to find yourself famous, Willie." He drove away, watched by fifty pairs of eyes.

"Oh, Willie," said Cerigwen. "Famous, you are going to be." She moved a little closer.

Five minutes later Mrs. Griffiths called to see whether Mrs.

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Evans had such a thing as a spoonful of tea. She hardly glanced at the bomb. More interested in Willie and Mrs. Evans, she was. But disappointing to see that neither of them was on the point of being rushed off to hospital. At last, "Feeling better now, Willie?" she asked tentatively.

"I've not been poorly," said Willie, puzzled.

Mrs. Griffiths tried again. "Tickling up your bronchitis, this cold weather will be for sure, Mrs. Evans," she said sympathetically.

"Healthy I am, indeed, thank you," said Willie's mam.

Mrs. Griffiths sighed. She reached the open front door. She sniffed. "Anyone would think there had been a motor car in the street," she said. "What a stink of petrol!"

Then Mrs. Evans knew her proudest moment. "Yes. Dr. Birkinshaw's car," she announced with dignity. "But only paying a social call on Willie and me the doctor was, I am thankful to say."

There was a crash.

Willie and his mam hurried inside. To their horror the contraption had rolled off the dresser on to the floor. But it wasn't damaged. Nothing that a bit of metal polish wouldn't put right. So they had a bite of supper. Proudly Willie escorted Cerigwen home. Then he and Mrs. Evans went to bed, excited, happy, their whole lives changed and enriched . . .

And Willie's discovery sat on the dresser, tensed, compact, its long life drawing close, very close, very close indeed, to its devastating end.

The next evening, Friday, was yet more exciting. Willie had meant to spend the time getting his Napoleon suit ready for the Fancy Dress Parade at the Hospital Fête on Saturday, but so many visitors there were that he never had a chance. At one time twenty people were gathered in the room, all looking at the contraption and saying, "Well, I never!"

And then, who should arrive but a man from the newspapers, who asked Willie a lot of questions.

"All wrote down in the papers it will be tomorrow," he told the delighted Willie.

But at last everyone went home. Willie's mam said, "Getting hot, your contraption is now. Be taking all the varnish off the dresser if you don't move it."

But Willie liked having his contraption on the dresser, so he got the asbestos mat off the gas stove and put it under the hissing thing, and he and his mam went to bed.

Far away, on bright Venus, the Minister for Planetary Affairs

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leapt into a Flying Saucer. "Earth! Quick as you can," he gasped to the waiting pilot.

They swung out, away into the unending dark. The pilot settled himself more comfortably at the controls. "What's the trouble, sir?" he asked.

"Oh, the usual muddle," said the Minister wearily. "They've decided now that if this bomb blows Earth up it will disorganize the whole Solar System. Including Venus. So we've got to get it back at all costs. At all costs," he repeated grimly.

"Suppose they couldn't have found it out a bit sooner," the pilot grumbled.

"Just like them to wait until the day it's due to explode," agreed the Minister. They flew some way in silence. "We shall find it easily with your detecting instruments," the Minister went on. "But there's not a moment to lose."

At last they slowed down to enter Earth's atmosphere. They swooped over Wales. They hovered over a collection of Earthmen's dwellings. With their detecting instruments they discovered that the bomb was in one of the dwellings.

The pilot pointed to a green space where a number of Earthmen and Earthwomen were gathered. "We'll land there," he said.

"I—I suppose it's safe," said the Minister doubtfully. "The Earthmen, I mean."

"Terribly primitive," the pilot said airily. "They couldn't possibly hurt us."

"Right. As soon as we land, we run and get hold of that bomb before it explodes. And I only hope we're in time."

They landed. They climbed out of the Saucer.

But before they could run to fetch the bomb, they were surrounded by a shouting, jostling crowd, who hurried them towards a platform on which a number of important-looking Earthmen were standing.

And Willie Evans, at the very pinnacle of his career, fell like Lucifer.

That morning he had opened the paper and there he was, on the front page, photograph and all. And, as if that wasn't enough, his Napoleon outfit, that had passed unnoticed for the last five years, had attracted the attention of the judges at the Fancy Dress Parade, and Willie had been summoned to the platform.

Dai Full Back, as Henry the Eighth, had been summoned, too. Evidently it was touch and go.

First, the judges looked at Willie. Then, they looked at Dai. And Willie, with one hand inside his jacket, nervously fiddling

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with his braces, looked just like the real Napoleon. And Dai, arrogant, hands on hips, scowling at an anxious Cerigwen in the front row, Dai looked just like Henry. But at last the judges appeared to reach their decision. They beckoned to Willie Evans.

And just at that moment, a flying-machine descended from the clouds and two men, dressed from head to foot in cloth of gold, stepped out. The effect on the judges and on the onlookers was instantaneous and decisive. The newcomers were pushed up on to the platform, and Napoleon, forgotten, was nearly pushed off. The Minister for Planetary Affairs was given a marble clock. The pilot received an electric razor. "We should have brought *them* presents. Beads or something," he whispered.

"Never mind that. What about the bomb?" snapped the Minister. But they were surrounded, speeches were made, and the sun had gone down on this funny little planet before they finally got away.

"Come on," hissed the Minister. "Run for it."

"What shall we do with it? I don't want it blowing up my Saucer."

"Oh, we'll drop it on their moon as we go past. No one's going to miss that."

They ran; while Willie Evans, looking like the other Napoleon coming back from Moscow, wandered disconsolately across the trampled grass of the carnival field.

In the gathering darkness he was aware of a figure coming towards him: the slim, erect figure of a girl.

"Robbed of the prize you were, Willie Evans, for sure," said Cerigwen. Her sympathy wrapped him like a blanket. "Never mind. Still got your contraption, haven't you."

Willie was filled with deep, though silent, gratitude. They began to walk towards the houses. Their hands touched and then—Willie never knew how it happened—they were walking hand in hand. Oh, exciting it was. And as Willie, dazed, passed through his open back door, he kissed Cerigwen on the lips.

"Well, there is pretty, kissing my girl for me," cried an angry, bitter voice, and Willie was aware of two things all at once. That Dai Full Back was sitting in Willie's kitchen. And that the contraption had gone from the dresser.

Dai stood up. "Come outside, Willie Evans, so that I can knock your teeth in gentlemanly," he said.

Now Willie was a man of peace. Challenged to fight for a girl, even for Cerigwen, he would normally have sought to find some

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other way of settling the dispute. But tonight he was a changed man. "What you done with my contraption, Dai Full Back?" he demanded aggressively.

"Damn your contraption. If I see anyone kissing Cerigwen, I knock his teeth in."

Willie went to examine the dresser. "Burnt a hole in mam's asbestos mat, too," he muttered. He turned back to Dai. "What you done with it, Dai?"

"I haven't done anything. I—"

Willie's anger was fearful to behold. He began to struggle out of his tail coat. "Come outside, Dai Full Back," he said in a terrible voice.

They went outside, the two men breathing heavily, Cerigwen carrying their coats. Daylight had faded now from the landscape, but the moon had kindled to brightness, painting with silver the Evans' back yard.

In that deceiving light, Dai Full Back looked twice his normal size. Willie began to wonder whether even the contraption was worth fighting for. In fact, he was quite sure it wasn't. But he found himself in a very difficult situation. He had the choice of being reduced very quickly to mincemeat, or of running away and losing Cerigwen for ever. He looked piteously at her; but she seemed to be fascinated by this new, aggressive Willie.

Her eyes were shining. "Oh, there is brave you are," she murmured.

Dai Full Back said, "I'll give you thirty seconds to run for it. And if you're still here after that time I'll flay you alive."

A difficult situation it was, for sure. Willie stood irresolute. But we shall never know what decision he would have reached. For the silver light in which they were standing flickered and changed suddenly, frighteningly.

Startled, Willie looked up. "The moon!" he cried. "Burst into a thousand pieces like a sky rocket it has, see."

"Never mind the moon," said Dai. "If you haven't gone in thirty seconds—"

But Willie wasn't listening. "Throw yourself flat on your face, Dai boy," he counselled. "Bits of moon tumbling about our ears there will be any moment now." Then he seized Cerigwen, and hurried her into the shelter of the house.

Dai ignored him. "Thirty seconds," he repeated. "One, two, three—" He counted on inexorably, his voice harsh in the dreadful, waiting silence.

The silence was broken.

It was broken by a heavy bombardment. The great earth reeled and groaned like a sick man. This way and that the frenzied

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tides roared, like lions who have seen their tamer dead. Then, miraculously, the tumult ceased.

But it was a long time before Willie and Cerigwen came out from under the stairs. Willie went into the yard, but where Dai had been standing there was nothing but a great jagged piece of moon. He wandered back into the house. He looked at the empty dresser. "Wish I knew what had happened to it," he muttered. "Beautiful, it was."

"Never mind your old contraption," said Cerigwen. Her voice was soft and caressing.

Willie looked at her. She was smiling, and holding out white arms to him. She had, indeed, all the brilliance of a starlit night. And Willie, taking her in his arms, knew that he had found something even more wonderful than the lost contraption.

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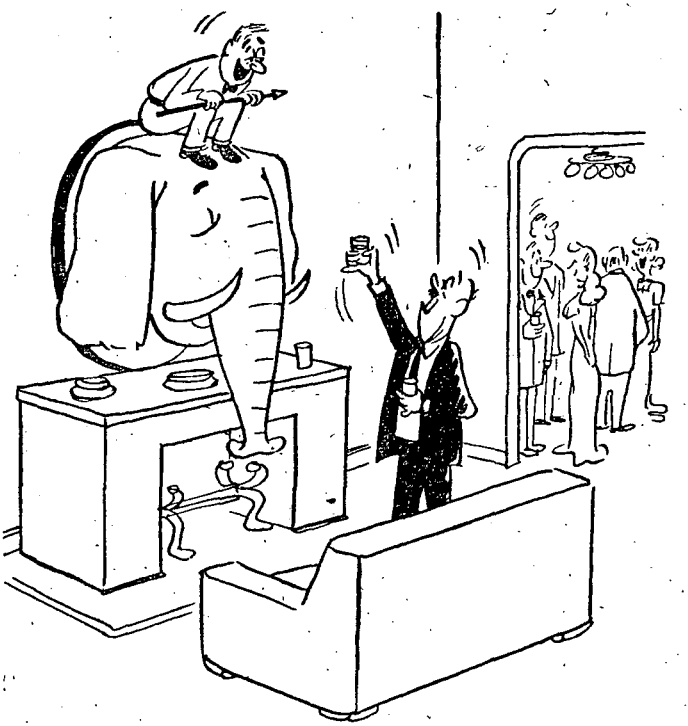

"No more for me; Sam, I'm driving."

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From the moment her body was found on the bank of Binford Park Reservoir, Rosa Bezley's murder posed a whole set of problems for Detective Sergeant Petrella and his superiors. Monk Bezley, her husband, was still at large after his prison break, and his Camden Town gang, now under Boot Howton, had made a brutal attack on Superintendent Gover. With Gover in hospital, and Haxtell on the Corinne Hart murder, Chief Superintendent Barstow had asked for a Superintendent from the Yard, and big, handsome, strong-chinned Chris Kellaway, a great man for results, had taken over.

"I'll tell you what I think," Kellaway had said to Petrella, "then we shall all start by thinking the same." But Petrella soon found himself falling out of step. Fingerprints on the window-jamb of the reservoir cottage did not belong to Ricketts, the intake attendant, who had recently given up the job. These prints were Boot Howton's, but whose was the single print on the German P. 38?

Kellaway had charged Howton with the murder of Rosa Bezley.

MR. HORSEY, the young barrister briefed by the Director of Public Prosecutions to conduct the case in the police court, was very painstaking. His wig was white, and his soul was pure.

"Your Worship," said Mr. Horsey, "this is a case in which the Crown charges capital murder against the prisoner, Thomas Albert Howton."

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BLOOD ON THE SCALES

MICHAEL GILBERT

" Capital murder, Mr. Horsey? "

" That is so. Murder by shooting, contrary to sub-section 1 (b) of Section 5 of the Homicide Act 1957."

Even this arid formula could not conceal the real meaning of his words, and all eyes swivelled round for an uncomfortable moment to the man in the dock. The old beast of capital punishment had been driven into retreat, but here was one human being who still stood within reach of his claws.

" Very well, Mr. Horsey," said the Magistrate.

" It is my duty to adduce the evidence on which this charge is founded and to show a—" Mr. Horsey swallowed briefly— " prima facie case for committal."

" I think we'd better have that window shut," said the Magistrate. " Why must the County Council constantly operate a pneumatic drill when my Court is sitting? Surely with a little co-operation they could do the work at weekends? "

The Clerk said he would make a note of it.

The interruption enabled Mr. Horsey to arrange his brief more conveniently, and he now proceeded with increasing confidence. " The body of a woman, subsequently identified by the dental surgeon and the doctor who had treated her during her lifetime as Mrs. Rosa Bezley, was discovered by some boys, lying among the bushes which overlook the Binford Park Reservoir, on the evening of November 5th."

" This year, or last year, Mr. Horsey? "

" Oh, this year, sir."

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"It's as well to be clear about these things."

Thus rebuked Mr. Horsey temporarily lost his place. An additional source of discomfort to him was the presence, in the bench in front, of Mr. Claude Wainwright, Q.C. Mr. Wainwright had appeared from nowhere at the last moment, and announced that he was instructed on behalf of the prisoner. With him, Mr. Clayesmore. This, felt Horsey, was unfair. He had been clearly given to understand that Senior Counsel were not to take any part in the preliminary proceedings. It was not that Wainwright had done anything or said anything, but the presence of his stringy neck and bald and shining head was an affront.

"It seemed unnecessary to produce the boys themselves as witnesses," concluded Mr. Horsey, "since they immediately, and very properly, sent for help in the form of the police. I will, therefore, call as my first witness, Detective Sergeant Petrella."

"Detective Sergeant Biretta," boomed the uniformed usher, and Petrella who had, up to this moment, been sitting in the company of the other Crown witnesses on a nine-inches-wide, worn, pinewood bench in an adjoining room, now stepped through the door and took the stand.

He described briefly how he had found the body; how it lay, and how it appeared to him that some effort had been made to cover it with leaves. He mentioned the finding of the evening paper of September 28th, with its missing centre page, and he produced a large-scale plan of the Binford Park Reservoir which was handed up to the Magistrate, who kept the Court waiting for several minutes while he examined it the wrong way up.

"One or two more questions, Sergeant," said Mr. Horsey, "relating to a later date in this investigation. Do you identify these six pieces of jewellery?"

Petrella agreed that he did so.

"Have they been identified as the property of Messrs. Colegrave, Jewellers, of Oxford Street?"

Mr. Claude Wainwright rose about two inches vertically, and the Magistrate said, "I think, Mr. Horsey, you ought to call a representative of Messrs. Colegrave on that."

"Certainly, sir," said Mr. Horsey. "I intend to do so. I merely wished to establish with this officer that the pieces of jewellery in question were noted in the Police Pawn List as the property of Messrs. Colegrave."

"The alleged property of Messrs. Colegrave," said Mr. Wainwright.

"Very well," said Mr. Horsey patiently, "the alleged property of Messrs. Colegrave."

Petrella admitted that this was so, and described his two visits to the pawnbroker, Mr. Robins. Mr. Wainwright did not cross-examine him, and he was released.

He departed through the doors at the rear of the court, waited until he judged that Mr. Horsey had got his teeth into the next witness, and then came back quietly and slipped into one of the

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public benches. The uniformed policeman on duty saw him come in and winked at him.

The next witness was Dr. Summerson, the pathologist. He told in his high-pitched, impersonal voice of the finding of the body, of his observations as to the probable time it had been there, of the autopsy subsequently conducted by him in the Highside Mortuary, and of his conclusion that Mrs. Bezley had been killed by a bullet fired from a pistol actually pressed against her body.

"I removed," he concluded, "from the neighbourhood of the spinal column, at a point seven inches below the fourth cervical vertebra, a cupro-nickel-cased lead bullet which I placed in a plastic envelope. I sealed and initialed the envelope, and subsequently handed it to Superintendent Causton of the Forensic Science Laboratory together with certain other exhibits."

Doctor Summerson proceeded to detail in precise tones, which somehow robbed his words of offence, exactly those portions of poor Mrs. Bezley that he had removed, labelled, and handed to Superintendent Causton. At the moment when he seemed to be about to step down from the box, Mr. Horsey asked, "Were there any other points of general interest about your examination which might assist the Court?"

"My examination," said Dr. Summerson, "also revealed that the deceased was three months pregnant at the time of her death."

The reporters' pencils scurried and squeaked. Summerson was always news.

Disappointingly, Mr. Wainwright seemed unmoved and unsurprised. He broke off a low-voiced conversation with Mr. Clayesmore long enough to indicate that he had no questions to ask, and Dr. Summerson stepped smartly from the box.

His place was taken by Superintendent Causton, who deposed that he had handed over the bullet passed to him by Dr. Summerson to another authority for microphotographic examination. He, in turn, was replaced by Charles Fenwick, the well-known ballistics expert, who expressed the view that the bullet found in the body had been fired from a P.38 pistol, a high-velocity weapon used by the German Army.

"Normally," said Mr. Horsey, "a bullet fired from such a weapon might pass right through the body of the person it struck?"

Mr. Fenwick agreed that it might, but said that if the pistol was pressed against the body of the victim, this would decrease its momentum and velocity. Mr. Fenwick then described, in considerable detail, a series of experiments he had made by firing bullets from a P.38 pistol handed to him—Exhibit Six—and discovered, so he understood, adjacent to the scene of the crime.

At the end of all this Mr. Wainwright rose to his feet and observed that the Defence did not intend to contest the fact that the bullet found in the deceased's body had been fired from the automatic pistol—Exhibit Six. It occurred to Petrella that if he had said so earlier, it would have saved everyone a lot of time and trouble, but Mr. Horsey seemed to be gratified by the admission.

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"I now propose," he said, "to deal with the question of identity."

"After lunch," said the Magistrate, and rose to his feet, and disappeared. The Court emptied.

Petrella wanted time for thought, and ate a solitary meal at a snack bar round the corner. There were, no doubt, a number of little routine jobs which he could have been doing, but technically he was still engaged, full time, on the Rosa Bezley case, and he could think of no more useful place to study that case in its entirety than the back of the Highside Magistrates Court.

In the somnolent hour which followed lunch the Court disposed of Mrs. Bezley's doctor and dentist, who were able to set at rest, from their careful records, any doubts as to identity. After them came Mrs. Fraser.

"It was with this witness," explained Mr. Horsey, "that the deceased was lodging at the time she met her death. She was the first person to identify her, but her evidence, as to clothing and shoes and so on, is not perhaps necessary in view of the witnesses you have just heard."

The Magistrate agreed that this was so.

"I shall ask her then first to tell us what she can about the deceased's movements on the day she met her death."

"Is presumed to have met her death," said Mr. Wainwright. "We have no evidence on the point beyond an evening paper which, even if it belonged to the deceased, she may easily have purchased some days before and carried about with her."

Mr. Horsey's mind was not flexible enough to deal, on the spot, with the possibilities opened up by this comment, so he merely repeated submissively, "Very well—is presumed to have met her death. Now, Mrs. Fraser . . . ?"

There was not, after all, a great deal that she could tell. Rosa had not left the flat when she herself went out to work. That would have been before half past eight. She had to be at work by nine. Being Saturday, she had her lunch at a place near her work, did some shopping, and got home about three. Rosa was gone. Her handbag and coat and hat were gone, but there was nothing to show that her departure was intended to be permanent.

"But in fact you never saw her again."

"Never."

"She had her own key?"

"She had a key of the flat."

"Which was found in her handbag and later identified by you?"

"Yes."

"Was she often out late at night?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes all night?"

"Oh yes."

"Did you ever ask her where she had been?"

"Certainly not, why should I?"

"No reason at all," agreed Mr. Horsey. "Only if you had asked her and she had told you, it might have been interesting for

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us to know." This did not appear to be a question so the witness made no attempt to answer it.

"I should like you to look at the accused." Mrs. Fraser twisted round and looked unwillingly at Howton who glared back at her out of his single eye.

"Have you ever seen him before today?"

"Once or twice, yes."

"In what circumstances?"

It was clear that she was pausing to choose her words. "He seemed to be some sort of acquaintance of Rosa's."

"Someone she was intimate with?"

"Really!" Mr. Wainwright exploded like an expensive cracker.

"I meant, was he an intimate friend?"

"Intimacy, Mr. Horsey," said the Magistrate, "is a word which, when used in Court, for some reason I have never been able to understand, almost always implies impropriety. Is that what you are alleging?" It was clearly what Mr. Horsey would have liked to allege; it was also quite clearly outside his brief, so he shook his head sulkily.

"If not, I would suggest that you merely ask the witness to describe what occurred within her own observation."

It amounted to very little. Howton had called once or twice. She could not be pinned down to dates, but not to her knowledge more than six times during the period Rosa had lodged with her.

"And were any of those the occasions on which she failed to return until the following morning?" inquired the Magistrate.

"No. She was back within a few hours on those occasions."

Mr. Horsey looked cross and said he had no more questions. Mr. Wainwright looked pleased, and indicated that he, too, would leave well alone. As the witness was on the point of descending and the usher had actually taken a deep breath to shout for the next witness, the Magistrate raised his hand. He was a very shrewd old man, wise by experience rather than book reading in the ways of the Law. He could read the minds of both Counsel with precision. Both were afraid of asking any more questions lest they prejudice their position at the later hearing.

"I would like to be a little clearer about this, Mrs. Fraser," he said. "It is a matter of some importance, you know. You are describing the relationship between the woman who is dead and the man who is accused of her murder. Would you have described them as lovers?"

Mrs. Fraser thought about it. Then she said, "Not in the film sense."

"You mean there was nothing romantic about it?"

"Definitely not."

"But there could have been a more sordid relationship?"

"Yes. I suppose so. There could have been."

"I am not here to put words into your mouth, Mrs. Fraser. You are a woman of the world. Just how would you yourself describe it?"

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"I should say that it was—a sort of business relationship between them."

The Magistrate turned it over in his mind. The packed Court was completely silent. Petrella found that the palms of his hands were wet. It was extraordinary how the bumbling processes of the Law could roll along, hour after hour, producing nothing and then, suddenly, a witness would say something that opened up a vista of startling clarity.

"Very well, Mrs. Fraser," said the Magistrate.

The rest of the evidence was something of an anticlimax. Old Mrs. Gurney, who lived opposite the reservoir gates, told of seeing the accused near the reservoir on the night of September 28th.

The young man who had been in charge of the diving operation, and whose name turned out to be William Borden, gave evidence of the finding of a P.38 pistol in the reservoir and re-identified Exhibit Six. He was of the opinion that it was a good deal too far from any point on the bank to have been thrown. In his view it had been dropped from a boat. This brought on Sergeant Dodds who told of the finding of the boat on the far bank of the reservoir.

Mr. Wainwright made a number of sharp notes on his brief.

The stand was then taken by Detective Superintendent Kellaway, who supplied some badly-needed background. He told the Court of the escape of Monk Bezley from custody and his presumed departure to France. He described his investigations at the reservoir and at the cottage—at that time, standing empty. The discovery of a complete set of fingerprints on the window-jamb—as to which, he understood, a later witness would speak. As he quitted the box, having left out, Petrella thought, a great deal more than he had put in, the Magistrate glanced at the clock. It was five minutes to five.

"If you have many more witnesses—" he said to Mr. Horsey.

"In fact, your Worship, only one more, Superintendent Burrell of the Fingerprint Bureau at New Scotland Yard."

"Very well," said the Magistrate. "I am myself quite prepared, of course, to sit here until any hour, but I have my officials to think about."

The Superintendent stepped up into the box, and was soon deep in the complexities of his craft. The atmosphere thickened as loops, arches, whorls, and composites, outer termini, closed deltas, and secondary characteristics flowed in a steady stream over the long-suffering head of the Magistrate's clerk.

The clock was pointing to half past five when the Magistrate said, "I take it, Superintendent, that what you are telling us is that you, as an expert, are perfectly satisfied that the four fingerprints on the cottage window were made by the prisoner."

"That is so, sir."

Now, thought Petrella. Now for it.

"Have you anything to add, Superintendent?"

"No, sir. I think that is all."

"Any more questions, Mr. Horsey?"

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He *can't*, thought Petrella. He can't not mention the print on the gun. Even Kellaway. He can't get away with it.

"No more questions," said Mr. Horsey, his voice now reduced to a croak.

"Have you any submissions on the evidence, Mr. Wainwright?"

Mr. Wainwright said he was instructed to reserve his defence for a subsequent occasion. This was not to be construed as meaning he agreed in any way with the evidence as put forward.

"In that case," said the Magistrate, "I have to record that I find a prima facie case made out against the accused. And I shall order that he be committed for trial at the Session of the London Assizes commencing at the Central Criminal Court in three weeks' time. Copies of all depositions to be made available to the Defence."

Petrella missed the closing formalities. He was out in the streets again, walking furiously. Hard as he walked, he could not outwalk his thoughts. Kellaway couldn't get away with it. Somehow he must speak to him . . .

"I'm not saying," said Superintendent Kellaway, "that I don't sympathize with you." He looked hard at Petrella, who was standing stiffly in front of his desk. "But this is my case, I'm responsible for it from the moment I'm put in charge until the jury files out at the Old Bailey. After that, you can do what you like about it."

Petrella said, "I only thought, sir, it might have been safer, from our point of view, to tell them about the print on the gun. The Fingerprint Section at Central are working on it now. Suppose it turns out to be someone not connected with Howton at all? It'd mean a last-minute switch in the case. Mightn't that be more awkward than having it now?"

"If it turned out to be Crippen," said Kellaway, "it wouldn't make a farthing's worth of difference to my case. That's one thing you've got to learn about police work, son. Concentrate on what does matter. Cut out what doesn't. You try to put forward all the facts, and what happens? Someone on the jury thinks up some theory or other, and once the jury get hold of a pet theory of their own, you can whistle for a conviction."

Petrella was well aware of the tricky nature of the ground on which he was treading. He was also perfectly conscious of the proper relationship between a junior Detective Sergeant and a senior and experienced Detective Superintendent, a man who, in the normal course of promotion, would next be given charge of a District, and who might therefore—the chances were, after all, only three to one against it—become Petrella's next chief.

Nevertheless, there was something which had to be said.

"You'll have to put it down to ignorance, sir. But I thought the Prosecution had to give all the evidence to the Defence. Whether it made sense or not. It's not only the second fingerprint. I mean, the fact that Ricketts, the intake attendant, left his

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cottage that day and has never been seen again. It could be a coincidence. Or he might have been meaning to go for some time. And hearing the shooting and all that rumpus, he got frightened, and pulled out straight away. Or—"

"Or he might be in the reservoir, too," said Kellaway softly. "Yes? I've thought of that. With the second bullet in him? Right?" Petrella nodded.

"Now tell me this. What difference would it make to the case against Howton if he knocked off Ricketts as well—because he got in the way, or to stop him talking? We're not charging him with two murders. Why should we? One's enough to hang him." He paused. "Did you know Charlie Gover is still unconscious, and every hour he's out makes it less likely he'll ever come round again? Even if he does, he may be blind, or paralysed, or plain crazy. That's the sort of thing a boot in the head does for you."

Petrella nodded. He had no answer to this.

"When you're fighting a war, you stick to the rules—if you can. And with people like Howton I'm at war. As for giving the Defence all the evidence, the rules say we must answer all their questions fully and truthfully. I'll do that. If anyone asks me about the print on the gun, I'll tell 'em. But not before. The same with Ricketts. One thing you said about that made sense. It might have been a coincidence. They are things that happen quite a lot in real life."

Kellaway got up, came round, and added in tones of surprising friendliness, "Anyway, it's something I've got to worry about, not you. Until the case finishes one way or the other at the Bailey, you're under my orders. And I'm ordering you not to worry about it. You can have it in writing if you like."

"No, that's all right, sir," said Petrella, summoning up a smile of his own. "I won't ask you to commit it to writing."

After he had gone Kellaway sat for a few minutes, quite still, and perfectly relaxed. Then he rang the bell for Sergeant Dodds.

Petrella walked out of Crown Road Police Station in an evil temper. He had been cleverly handled, and the fact that he realized it did not make things any better. The appeal which had been made to him was a hard one to deny. The police was a private army. Criminals were the enemy. The rest of the world were onlookers. But onlookers with certain undefined but unpleasant powers of interference. The way to deal with them was to stick to the letter of the law. Learn the Judges' Rules by heart, and give the devil no more than his due. And over all, and before all, and above all, never forget that the team came first.

And if he did decide to do the unspeakable thing, whose side was he on? On Boot Howton's? Howton, who had kicked Charlie Gover nearly to death, who bullied and pimped and tramped on people weaker than himself? A creature who in a rational society would be put away. Was he going to fight for him and against—not Kellaway, Kellaway was an accident, something that had happened to him—against Gover, and Haxtell?

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" I'm damned if I'll do it," said Petrella out loud.

" Certainly not," said someone behind him. Petrella swung about, and found the face of Mr. William Borden a few inches from his. " Oh hullo," said Petrella. " I'm sorry. I don't usually talk to myself."

" You looked pretty steamed up," said Borden. " Come and have a noggin. They're just open."

" Good idea," said Petrella. He drank very little, and never at midday, but this seemed the moment to start a few bad habits.

The beer was very good, light amber brown, well cooled, and of greater than ordinary strength. They drank a pint each, slowly, and a second pint rather faster. The third pint they carried across to a table in the corner of the empty bar.

" Is it easy to be a frogman? " asked Petrella, who was following his own thoughts, as people often do when drinking together.

" Nothing to it. Teach you in a morning."

" Isn't it dangerous? "

" Only if you forget to put enough warm clothes on. Could catch a nasty cold. A friend of mine got pneumonia, diving without his pants on. Now there's another thing. That job we were on at the reservoir. When we found the gun—you remember?"

" Yes, I remember."

" Do you know why we stopped? "

" I thought you'd finished."

" Finished, nothing! We were less than halfway across. What they *said* was, to save money. We're an expensive outfit. Set you back twenty-five quid a day for our services. All right. We'd found what they were looking for, so we stop. Economy. But that wasn't the real reason. Another pint? "

" I—oh yes. If you like." The fourth pint was brought.

Petrella said, " About the reservoir job. *Why* did you stop? "

" We stopped because the police were scared that we might turn up something else and spoil the case they were cobbling up."

" Well," said Petrella, " the real thing is, are you prepared to do anything about it? "

" What do you suggest we do? " said Borden, suddenly becoming reasonable and business-like.

" I think the same as you do. There's something more in that reservoir: maybe another gun; maybe something quite different."

" Maybe the old boy who owned the cottage, and walked out of it without leaving a forwarding address."

" Yes."

" And you'd like me to have a shot at finding him for you? "

" What I'd really like to do is have a shot myself; with you to show me how, I mean."

" This calls for more beer."

" It's my turn." Petrella secured two more pints. It was the nicest beer he remembered drinking. It was a pity that he spilt a bit of it on the return journey, but the floor had a very slight tilt. He hadn't noticed it before.

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"I suppose you can do that diving stuff after dark."

"Certainly. Electric torch on the helmet. Matter of fact, it's always dark if you go deep enough."

"We'd have to do it at night, anyway. Otherwise we'd give the show away. Even if we slipped in without being seen, people would spot the bubbles from the what's-its-name."

"From the aqualung. Yes. There is an oxygen set which doesn't show bubbles. But the aqualung's safer."

"I'd have to practise quite a bit first," said Petrella.

"The best place for that's a swimming-bath." Borden felt for his wallet and extracted a card. "That's my business telephone number. If you feel of the same mind tomorrow morning, ring me up. How do we square this with the top brass?"

"I don't," said Petrella with dignity, "anticipate any trouble at all."

"You don't, eh?"

"None at all. If Superintendent Kellaway says anything to me, I shall say to him, *Fiat justitia, ruat coelum.*"

"That ought to shake him," agreed Borden. "What does it mean?"

"It means, let justice prevail, though the sky fall."

"I see." Borden looked at his new friend critically. "And just when were you planning to say this?"

"The next time he says something to me."

"I think I should leave it until tomorrow, if I was you. It'll sound all the better in the morning." He got up and walked slowly across to the door, Petrella following him willy-nilly.

Outside the sun was shining and the sky was blue.

"What about something to eat?"

"No," said Petrella. "No time. Too busy to eat."

"What about a taxi?"

"Perfectly all right," said Petrella. "Very good of you, but perfectly all right. Be seeing you." He swung round on his heel, went farther than he intended, and steadied himself by holding on to the lamp post.

"Hell's bells," said Borden to himself.

As he watched, Petrella smiled gravely at him, waved, and started straight off down the pavement, did a stem turn at the corner, and disappeared from his sight. "At least he can still walk," said Borden. "Stupid of me, really. I hope he'll be all right."

Petrella felt fine. It was a grand day. He was in grand form. The world was a good place. All that was needed was a little give and take, a little co-operation. Why had this not occurred to him before? Now that it had occurred to him, he would put it into practice. He would seek out Kellaway, and he would say—

"Where are you off to, Patrick?" Sergeant Gwilliam loomed up in front of him.

"I'm going to see Superintendent Kellaway and I'm going to talk to him about co-oper-operation."

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"Are you, now?" said Gwilliam thoughtfully. He waved his hand. The police car which had been idling by the kerb drew up.

"It's a house at the top of Foljamb Road. No. 37, I think."

"There's a mistake somewhere here," said Petrella. "I don't want to go home. I want to go to the Station. I've got something imp-important I must say to old Kellaway." He found himself in the back of the car with Sergeant Gwilliam wedged beside him.

At No. 37, Foljamb Road, where Petrella's landlady, Mrs. Catt, lived, he protested again, but feebly. The front door was open, and Gwilliam came in with him.

"Which is your room?" he said. "First floor back. All right. Up we go. Less talk and a little more co-oper-operation."

Next morning Petrella woke feeling curiously clear-headed and with an imprecise recollection of the previous day. He remembered Bill Borden, and took out his card. One of the police drivers grinned at him as he went in. He found Gwilliam at work.

"Did you take me home in a car yesterday?"

"That's right," said Gwilliam. "You had a touch of 'flu."

Later that day he had to go down to Scotland Yard, and he called in on Sergeant Blinder to see how he was progressing.

"You want to know about that print on the gun?" said the Sergeant. "It's a single print. Quite a good-looking one." He pulled out a ten-magnification photograph, and Petrella stared uncomprehendingly at the ridges and valleys, the watersheds and river-junctions of the human tegument. It might have been a physical geography of the moon for all it said to him.

"You've got six to eight possible points of identification. But nothing so absolutely out of the way that you can make a positive start from it. We'll clear it in time, don't you worry. But we can't work miracles, that's all. No matter who calls for 'em." Petrella gathered that Kellaway had been exercising some more of his well-known drive on the Fingerprint Section.

"I tell 'em all," said Blinder, "fingerprints are a science. You can't hustle science. Not if you want reliable results."

"Tell me something," said Petrella. "Do you have all your prints in a single collection?"

"That's right. One Main Index of all recorded prints. Except, of course, there's the Aged Collection."

"Aged Collection?"

"Prints over a certain age. We don't keep 'em in the Main Index for ever."

"What's the time limit?"

"There's no rule. But if a print hasn't been turned up for thirty or forty years we take the view that the owner's seen the light of reason, and decided to behave himself. Have you any reason to think—?"

"No," said Petrella. "There aren't any old age pensioners involved in this case. All the same, suppose a man did something silly when he was seventeen. Forty years later, he'd be fifty-seven.

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Not too old to beat up some more trouble, if he wanted to."

"All right," said Blinder. "Better safe than sorry. When I've cleared the Main Index I'll sort out the Aged Collection."

That evening Petrella completed the first part of his programme by calling at No. 39 Corum Street. Mrs. Fraser was in, all right. He could hear her moving about. But there was a long interval after he knocked, and he wondered if she would answer at all.

Eventually, when she had identified her caller, she slipped the catch and let him in. "You can't stay long," she said. "What is it you want?"

"Can I sit down?"

"Yes. Of course." She summoned up a smile for him. It was about as warm and heartfelt as a chairman's annual vote of thanks to the staff.

"I'll try not to bother you. I expect you've been bothered enough in the past few days." She looked up sharply at this.

"Giving evidence in Court."

"Oh, *that*. I didn't mind that. I thought the Magistrate was rather nice. Did you hear me?"

"I was in the back row of the stalls," said Petrella. "I thought you gave a most polished performance."

She smiled again, a little more happily. "What do you want to know now?"

"It's a matter of timing that's been worrying me. You know Rosa's husband, Monk Bezley, got away from his prison escort on the Friday. It happened in the early afternoon."

"Did it? I don't think that was in the papers."

"I'm telling you," said Petrella. "And please get it out of your head that I'm trying to trap you, or trip you up in some way. I'm telling you, because I want your help."

"All right."

"What I was thinking was this. We've all been assuming that Monk lay up, that first night, with Howton and the other boys. And I expect he did. But it seems to me, don't you think, that he would have tried to get hold of his wife first."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"That would be on Friday evening. He wouldn't come here, of course. He'd know the place would be watched as soon as his escape was notified. It would have to be a telephone message. What arrangement have you got about those?"

"There's a telephone in the basement, where the woman who owns the house hangs out. She's not keen on us bothering her, so we don't encourage our friends to ring us up. In all the time I've been here, I doubt I've been rung half a dozen times."

"In that case," said Petrella, "it would be likely to stick in your mind if anyone telephoned Rosa that Friday evening."

"Yes," said Mrs. Fraser. "It would stick in my memory."

"And did anyone?" In the sudden silence Petrella could pick up the sound of movement in the next room. Evidently the Polish lady was at home.

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" If you don't remember, I could ask the lady in the basement."

" No. I'd rather you didn't do that. She's very touchy. I'm casting my mind back. There was a call."

" You're certain? "

" Yes. Fairly certain. It would be about nine o'clock."

" Was Mrs. Bezley away long? "

" I don't think so, or I should have remembered."

" And did you notice any difference in her manner when she came back? " Jean made a little gesture of impatience.

" We weren't sharing rooms," she said. " She was living her life, I was living mine. I know when she came back, because she had to come through my room. If she'd had a door of her own, I wouldn't have known anything much about her."

" I quite see that," said Petrella, " and I'm sorry to have bothered you. You've made the last question I wanted to ask you unnecessary as well." He took up his hat.

" That's a neat way to tantalize a body. Now I shall lie awake all night wondering what it was."

" It was just a thought really," said Petrella. " I wondered if Mrs. Bezley might have known Ricketts? "

" Who was Ricketts? "

" He was an intake attendant," said Petrella. " It's all right. I can let myself out. Good night." He closed the door softly.

Mrs. Fraser stood still, her head bent, listening to his footsteps. She heard the front door slam, and still she made no move.

" When you come to working out of doors in weather like this," said Bill Borden, " you'll put on everything you've got. String vest, long pants, pullover, balaclava helmet, socks, mittens. But for practising in a heated swimming-bath, bathing trunks will do."

" What a lot of stuff," said Petrella.

" It's all useful. Put on the bottom part of the suit first. You have to wriggle a bit to get your legs right down. O.K.? I'll put on mine. Then we can help each other into our tops. Now for a bit of deflation." As he spoke he was unrolling a length of tubing which was attached halfway down the front of the suit.

" Just like an umbilical cord," said Petrella.

" Same thing, but in reverse," said Borden. " This is used for extraction." He put the end of the tube in his mouth and started to suck. Petrella did the same. At once, he could feel the rubber diving-suit begin to tighten against his flesh. It was a not unpleasant sensation, like growing a new skin.

" Most important part of the operation," said Borden, between gasps. " Must empty all the air out of a suit before you start. If you don't, as likely as not it goes down to your heels. Nothing makes you feel sillier than bumping round on your forehead. Now roll the tube up and tuck it in. Same principle as when you fasten up a football, only this time you're inside the ball. Next, the aqualung. Test it before you put it on."

" Test what? "

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"Just give it a couple of sucks to see the air's coming through. If the intake valve sticks, you'll have to surface in a hurry. Set the regulator at five. Now put her up on your back. Like a haversack. Gloves and flippers next, and you're practically ready to go." He examined the new recruit critically.

"All you need's your weight belt."

"I feel quite heavy enough already, thank you."

"If you went into the water like that, you'd float, not sink. The compressed air in that aqualung's as good as a Mae West." Borden extracted from the kit-bag a broad webbing belt with slots in it and, after some thought, inserted eight flat leaden discs. "It's a funny thing, but in the early days it always used to be assumed that you had to put the weights in the feet. Sort of hang-over from the days of diving suits. Made swimming almost impossible. That's right. The torch on your helmet may make a bit of difference. I'll adjust you after the first dive if you feel at all sluggish."

"I don't feel sluggish," said Petrella. "I feel immobile."

"Just wait till you get in the water."

"Dive in?"

"Nothing so dashing. Lower yourself in sedately, bottom first. If you dived, as like as not you'd tear the mask right off your face. All set?"

Petrella lowered himself obediently into the water, clung to the rail for a moment, and then let go. His trim had been so accurately adjusted that he felt neither weight nor buoyancy. It was only when his world showed suddenly green that he realized he was under the surface. He turned over, steadied himself, then shot across the floor of the bath with such speed that he nearly crashed head on into the wall opposite. He saved himself with his hands, and came back again more sedately. Nothing to it, really.

After five minutes he surfaced, and found Borden sitting on the edge of the bath smoking a cigarette. "Is that all?"

"In six foot of water in a warmed and lighted swimming-bath, yes," said Borden. "The next thing you've got to practise is just getting the stuff off and on, until you can do it blindfold. Remember, next time you put it on will be in the dark, in the open. And it'll probably be raining. When you can get properly rigged up inside ten minutes in conditions like that you'll be fit for field work. Now, let's start from the beginning again . . ."

That evening, after dark, they made a reconnaissance of the reservoir. Borden parked his car in a cul-de-sac south of the Binford Park Athletic Ground. He had the diving gear in two large duffel bags. They found a place where they could climb the railings, and started up. By keeping the embanked running-track on their left and working along the inner fence which separated it from the reservoir they had no difficulty in locating the gate, now embellished with a shiny new padlock.

"Lucky I kept a spare key," said Petrella, with a grin. The old iron gate squeaked in protest as they opened it.

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"Needs a spot of oil," said Borden. "I'll remember to bring some next time. This is only a dry run. Just to see what the snags are. What we want now's a changing-room. We can do it in the open, but we may have to use torches, and we don't want someone spotting us and dialling 999."

"What about the cottage?"

"Not a bad idea," said Borden. "Really, quite a good idea. Do you think we can get in without busting anything?"

"I noticed the window in the scullery had a slip catch."

It proved even easier than that. The kitchen door was unlocked.

"Would there be any risk," said Borden, "if we keep our stuff here? It would save us humping it up each night."

"How long do you reckon this is going to take us?"

"Five or six nights to do the thing properly. A double-cylindered aqualung lasts about two hours. I don't reckon we could do much more than an hour a night. Apart from anything else, the cold gets you down in the end."

"Then we've got to take a chance on no one having occasion to search this place for a week. I think it's a fair bet. The only people likely to be nosing about are the Water Board. Suppose they find our suits. Ten to one old Lundgren will assume it's something official, to do with the police, and he'll contact me."

As they came out of the cottage the moon appeared from behind a slow-moving cloud, and silvered the picture for them. A light mist was lying on the surface of the reservoir. The water looked black and cold and as tenacious in its mystery as the grave itself.

"Do you mean to say," said Petrella in a whisper, "that we have got to look inside that?"

"Cold feet?"

"Cold all over."

It took half an hour to shift the gear. They found a big cupboard in the kitchen wide enough to store the kit-bags, end to end. As Petrella was fitting them into place, something drove painfully into the index finger of his right hand. "Ouch," he said.

Borden turned the torch on. "You been bitten by a rat?"

"No. It feels like the broken end of a nail."

"Better get that cleaned up," said Borden. Blood was beginning to ooze. "A friend of mine lost his right hand just that way. A rusty nail—"

"You and your friends," said Petrella. "Don't worry about my hand. Shine the torch on the floor. I want to see what did it."

It was the broken end of the brass screw of a hook.

"Have you got a screwdriver?"

There was one in the frogman's kit. Petrella wrapped a handkerchief round his hand, put the end of the screwdriver into the join in the floor a few inches from the broken shank of the hook, and levered. A piece of floorboard came up.

Borden was breathing down his neck. "What is it?"

"It's a cache—someone used it to keep things in. He's sawn off one end of the board. See? Not long ago. As it was a tight

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fit, he used to drive a cup hook in to help to lift the board out. The hook broke. And now I've cut my finger on it."

It was a space three foot long and nine inches wide, blocked off on two sides by the brick wall, and on the other two by joists. And it was empty. Petrella put the board back, and stood up.

"There's something I don't quite like about this place," said Borden. "Difficult to say what. It just doesn't feel right."

Petrella said, "It's the damp. You can smell it."

"It smells worse than damp to me," said Borden. "Let's get back to the car before we start imagining things."

On the following evening Petrella came off duty at seven o'clock. In Foljamb Road, a figure drifted up out of the shadows between two street lamps. It was a girl. Petrella had never seen her before. She looked, in the dim light, about seventeen. She had a sick, white face, and she spoke with the husky voice of a heavy smoker.

"Your name Pirelli?"

"Petrella."

"That's it. You're a bogey. I've got a message for you from Jean. She wants to see you. And you're not to come to her place, nor where she works. That's important."

"Then how—?"

"You know Collins' shop?"

Petrella reflected. "Yes," he said at last. "A little newsagent and tobacconist in Channel Street."

"She'll put a card in the window when she can see you."

"What's your name?" said Petrella. But he found he was talking to himself and the lamp post. The girl had gone.

That evening Petrella was waiting at eleven o'clock when Borden's car turned the corner, cut its engine, and drifted to a stop. There was no need for talk. It took ten minutes to reach the cottage. The threads Petrella had stretched across the back door and the cupboard were unbroken. Their base was secure.

Borden had brought blankets with him, and these they nailed across the single small window. A candle was brought out, and by its dancing light the ceremony of dressing began. It was a rite they were to carry out six times in all, and the memory of it remained in Petrella's mind when a lot else had faded. With their great, black, contorted shapes, they were like men from outer space—glass-masked, hunchbacked, web-footed, their black hands performing strange ritual. Curiously enough, all feeling of nightmare receded as soon as he entered the water. This was a job of work. Something which needed proper attention and left no room for fantasy.

Borden submerged first to mark the area of their night's search with long aluminium pegs. They were starting where the official search had left off, casting wide on either side of the line.

"I'll mark out an oblong strike," said Borden. "You work up and down the left-hand side, from the corners inwards to the centre pegs. I'll do the same on the right-hand side. Don't

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hurry. Things sink very quickly even when it's a clear gravel bottom like this. Get your face down to it, and search every square inch."

After the first night, Petrella's memories of that week became blurred. The work, during the hour that they stayed under water, was not only monotonous, it was detached, trance-like, and otherworldly. Their only interrupters were fish, attracted by the beam of the torch, which would swim up, lazy and fearless, to examine the new planet that had arisen in their watery hemisphere. One large carp Petrella got to know quite well. The light from his helmet torch, striking on to the silvery scales, turned them a rich, blood red.

The fish would hang, hardly moving, in front of his face, dart provocatively away, and then slowly return. Petrella decided in the end, that it was trying to make love to him.

At the conclusion of each lateral movement of the search he would meet Borden. They would work up to each other until his right hand touched Borden's left, then they would depart silently to the outer edge of the area, move forward the peg that marked their progress, and so start again.

At the end of an hour the cold drove them to the surface. They stripped their suits and pummelled some warmth back into each other's body. Then they dressed, made their way back to the car, and went home to bed. And to sleep.

Petrella had to be up at six and it was perhaps this continued shortage of sleep that gave in retrospect such an air of unreality to that week.

On the fourth night, remembered for its cold, unrelenting rain, they were startled, on returning to the car, by a cloaked figure which stepped out of the shadows and shone a torch upon them.

"Good evening."

"Good evening, Bateson," said Petrella.

"Oh, it's you, Sergeant."

"Who did you think it was, car thieves?"

"Didn't recognize the car," said Bateson. "I been keeping an eye on her for some time."

"Then you can take your eye off," said Petrella, "because we're going home to bed. Good night."

"Will he tell anyone about us?" asked Borden.

"He won't tell anyone," said Petrella. "He'll simply put it in his occurrences book. It's a sort of log all policemen keep."

"Who sees that book?"

"His sergeant."

"It was a mistake ever teaching policemen to read."

It was on the following night, the fifth of their search, that Borden failed to reappear at the end of the dive. They had known before they started that there was a bare sixty minutes of pressure left in their aqualungs, and they had slightly hastened the search to give themselves a safety margin.

Petrella was getting ready to go down and look for him, when

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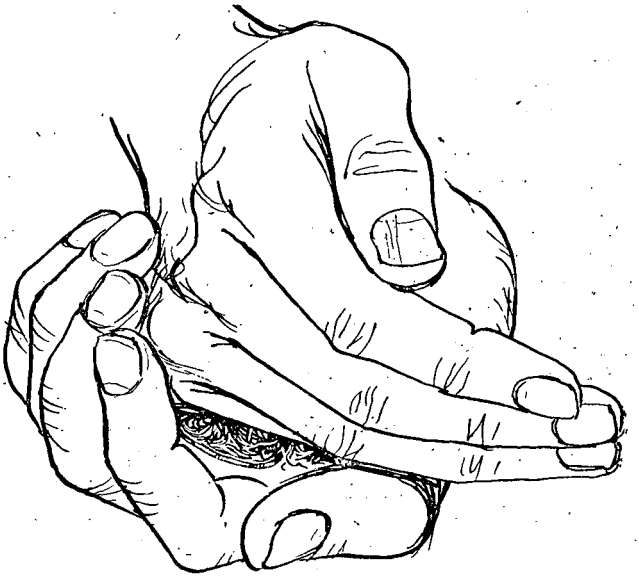

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the frogman's head broke surface. They paddled in silence to the bank. "What kept you?" said Petrella. "I began to think you were in trouble."

"Just at the end of the square," said Borden, "right on the dead-ball line, as you might say, I felt something. I'm sure of it. You can almost sense it, when the bottom's been churned up and settled down again. And there was a good deal of activity among our fishy hosts."

"Did you—?"

"I hadn't time. I felt the air beginning to suck dry, so I came up quick. We'll finish this job tomorrow night, Patrick."

That was Monday night. It was on Tuesday morning that Kellaway sent for Petrella. He could read trouble in Dodds' face. It stood up like a thick, black ridge of thundercloud. The storm hit him as he entered the room.

Kellaway was standing. He was so angry that he was past all the ordinary signs of anger. He was a little whiter than usual but his voice was almost civil. "Will you kindly explain," he said, "what the devil you're up to in that reservoir?"

Petrella did so as best he could. His words fell into a pool of inky silence.

"And is this stunt something you're doing in your own time, to improve your health? Or is it connected with the Reservoir case?"

There were dangers both ways. Petrella said, "It sort of arises out of the Reservoir case."

"Then if it's police work, why has no report been put in? I warned you as nicely as I could, some days ago, to lay off this self-advertising stunt of yours. Just come out of the clouds for a moment. You're not Sexton Blake. You're a Detective Sergeant in the Metropolitan Police force, and you're under my orders, which I thought were clear enough to be understood, even by you. I don't want to make an official matter out of this, and put some mark on your book which will stop you getting promotion. But you step out of line once more, and that's what I'll have to do. Have I succeeded in making myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Petrella. "Quite clear."

"Have you got anything more you want to say about it?"

"No, sir."

"Then I've got one thing more. You've been called as a witness when the case opens at the Central Criminal Court tomorrow. A lot of your evidence was only formal, so I've arranged to dispense with it, or do it some other way."

He paused, and added, "There's no sense in taking the field in a Cup Final, with a player who may shoot through his own goal."

In the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey, Mr. Justice Rowan looked warily round him as the Court rose at his entrance. Charles Younger, he saw, of Senior Treasury Counsel; and with him, Margesson, the most brilliant and painstaking of the Juniors. The Crown, he concluded, must have a shaky case if they had put

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two such stars together to open the batting. For the Defence, Claude Wainwright, a real old war horse. Mr. Wainwright's Junior, a man older even than Mr. Wainwright, he was not conscious of having seen before.

Mr. Justice Rowan looked like an actor of the modern school; the school begotten by Television out of Cinema, in which sincerity of manner and a good frontal bone structure are more important than the classic profile.

The jury appeared as baffled and inert as juries usually appear at the beginning of a heavy case. Probably they would come to life later. The public gallery was full and the press-box grossly overcrowded. One day they would get a really sensational case and a pressman would die of suffocation.

The preliminaries over, Mr. Younger rose to his feet. He had thick black hair, bright brown eyes, and a face like an intelligent prize-fighter. He said, "This is a case in which the Crown charges capital murder against the accused, Howton, for the killing, by shooting, on September 28th last, at or near the Binford Park Reservoir of Rosa Marion Bezley, the wife of Christopher Alfred Bezley, whose whereabouts are unknown, but who at that date had himself recently escaped from one of Her Majesty's Prisons, where he was being detained on a criminal charge."

Mr. Younger looked at the jury for the first time and added, "I have stressed the position of the deceased woman's husband at this early stage in the proceedings because although absent—he is believed by the police to be in France—he plays an important part in this story.

"The view taken by the Crown is that this is what might perhaps be described as a gang killing—I can think of no more dignified words for an essentially sordid crime, committed in part, at least for gain, by an associate of a known criminal."

Mr. Younger was, here, on very delicate ground, and no one knew it better than himself. The sentence which he had just thrown off, apparently impromptu, had cost him and his Junior many anxious hours to compose.

"To understand the case properly, you must know that Bezley was an active and successful larcenist. He headed a group which concentrated on robbing jewellers' shops. It was a North London gang, and most of the offences took place in North London. At the time of Bezley's arrest the police had compiled, and I shall produce to you, a long list of pieces, mostly small diamonds, gold, and platinum, which they were thought to have taken. When Bezley was arrested more than a year ago and his gang dispersed, very little of this jewellery was discovered. I shall try to show you that it had been placed in the hands of his wife who, on her own account or acting on his instructions, had hidden it.

"We now come to the first concrete fact in this curious chain of facts which it will be my duty to set out before you. From the moment that Bezley, the author of these thefts, disappeared behind bars, the proceeds of his crimes started to reappear,

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sometimes in altered form, on the market. We shall produce witnesses who were offered, or have purchased, such jewellery. Two of these men definitely, and one less definitely, have identified the accused as the man who disposed of the jewels to them.

"I shall further show, by the testimony of the lady with whom the deceased lodged, a Mrs. Fraser, that during the whole of the period between her husband going to prison and the supposed time of her death, Mrs. Bezley was—" Mr. Younger paused delicately—"in touch with the accused, going out to meet him on three or four occasions that we know of, and very likely on other occasions as well.

"This, then, is the picture. This is what was happening during the first eight or nine months of last year. Matters were precipitated by an event which neither the accused nor Mrs. Bezley could well have foreseen. On September 27th last, Bezley escaped on his way from a London prison to permanent detention. It is not known how he spent the first night of his freedom, nor what happened to him thereafter, although there is secondary evidence, which I will produce to you for what it is worth, that he crossed to France and has remained there ever since.

"On the following day, Saturday, September 28th, which is a date you will have to remember very carefully, Mrs. Bezley went to the grounds of the Binford Park Reservoir. We do not know at what time, except that she left her lodgings before three o'clock; and one of the minor mysteries of the case is how she managed to get into the grounds of the reservoir at all. But that she went there is past dispute, for she remained there, and there her body was found, under a covering of hastily scraped-up leaves, some six weeks later.

"The accused also went to the reservoir." Mr. Younger turned and looked at Howton, who stared sullenly back, single red eye ablink.

"Three people, local residents, have now been found by the police who saw him at it, or near it, that night. He was accompanied by certain—associates. One witness observed him climbing into the grounds of the reservoir itself. A tragedy might have been averted had she informed someone in authority of what she had seen but, since she was over seventy and alone in the house, you may feel that she is not greatly to be blamed.

"We are now in the realm of conjecture. I will give you the facts, as they are known to us, and you will have to draw your own conclusions from them. At some time—it is reasonable to suppose that it was that night, unless he was in the habit of visiting the reservoir regularly—the accused entered the small cottage at the southern end of the reservoir. We know that he was there because he left his fingerprints in the paintwork of the living-room window when he climbed in. The cottage was at that time standing empty, the employee of the Water Board who occupied it having departed. Another curious fact of this case is that despite the efforts of the police, and in spite of the publicity which attended

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the earlier proceedings, this man, a Mr. Ricketts, has not come forward. He may or may not have anything to do with the case, but one would have thought that he would have come forward to say, 'I am the man you are talking about.' One would have thought that he would have done this, if—" An unbiased observer swears that Mr. Younger paused for a full five seconds after the word, "if." In the deep silence someone was heard to gasp. A quick drawing-in of breath. It was not the prisoner. He was staring fixedly ahead of him. "—if only to assist the police in their inquiries," concluded Mr. Younger mildly.

"The next fact to consider is that a boat, customarily kept at the foot of the cottage garden, was found sunk and abandoned at the opposite end of the reservoir, and that roughly halfway along its course, a diver working for the police recovered, from the bed of the reservoir, an automatic pistol. It was at a point too far from the shore for it to have been thrown. Tests have shown, quite conclusively, that it was from this gun, pressed up against her side, that the bullet was fired which killed Mrs. Bezley. Other witnesses will depose that they have seen the accused in possession of this gun or one very like it."

"That's a lie," said Howton.

"Silence," said the usher.

"It's a —ing lie, and the man who says it's a —ing liar."

"Mr. Wainwright," said the Judge, "will you explain to your

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client that he will have an opportunity of giving evidence himself if he wishes, at the proper time."

Mr. Wainwright arose, but not, it was remarked, with any undue speed, and said, " I much regret the irregular observations made by my client, and agree that they ought to form no part of the record."

" Very well, Mr. Younger," said the Judge.

" At this stage," said Mr. Younger, " I should add only a word about motive. I have indicated, in outline, what the Crown will try to show you, through its witnesses. It will bring Rosa Bezley to the reservoir, and it will bring the accused to the reservoir, with a gun. And it will leave Rosa Bezley dead on the bank, with a bullet fired from that gun inside her; and the gun itself concealed, with some care, in the deepest part of the reservoir. And thereafter it will show you jewellery, formerly in the possession of the dead woman, being secretly disposed of by the accused. But there is necessarily a gap in the story. No one heard the shots. There was a silencer on the gun, and it was pressed into the woman's side. No one who saw the murder committed has come forward. It would perhaps be surprising if they had. And no one knows with any certainty why the shot was fired. I could myself suggest a number of motives, and I have no doubt that your ingenuity could supply others. His Lordship will, I know, guide you more fully on the relevant law in due course. At the moment all I need say is that there is no onus upon the Prosecution to prove any motive at all. Many murders are committed without motive, or for motives so small as to be ludicrous."

" Murder without motive," scribbled the reporter from one of the brighter dailies. After a moment's thought he changed it to, " Apparently motiveless murder."

" I shall now call Dr. Summerson, the pathologist who first examined the body . . ."

Under the waters of Binford Park Reservoir, the black, thick darkness was broken only by the yellow light from the two helmet torches. Now that they had stopped searching and had started to dig, their lights were dimmed by the mud and sediment that their fingers were scrabbling up a few inches away from their own faces.

They were living in a half world, a world in which sight and touch were effective, but ears and nose were cut off. All that Petrella could hear was a steady buzzing and throbbing inside his own head, caused by the exertion of the work which had set up all sorts of unexpected pressures inside his watertight shell. For a moment he felt the air sucking dry at the inlet, and panicked, and knew in the same instant that it was only imagination.

Their hands sank in deeper. It was there, right enough. Not a shadow of doubt. After five nights of patient searching, *this* was what they had come to find. It was bedded down and sunk into the soft mud and gravel but their efforts were stirring it. Shapeless, sodden, grotesque, inert, it was preparing to rise from

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its long sleep, up from the darkness of night and underwater, to the cruel light of day.

One complete arm was free now, a grotesquely inflated arm, the end apparently encased in black leather. Then a leg, with a monstrous, padded thigh. Borden touched Petrella, and indicated the time had come for them to lift. Both together. Hold it tight. It was a little easier as the buoyancy of the water began to help them. Inch by inch they fought their way upwards, hugged to the monster they were raising. Then the surface. Then the slow task of dragging shorewards the waterlogged hulk which rolled and surfaced and dipped and played in their wake.

As soon as they were ashore, Petrella stripped off his mask. The charnel stench assaulted the sweet night. He stepped aside to control his heaving stomach.

Borden, impassive, stared down at their obscene salvage.

"They'll have to argue bloody hard," he said, "if they want to argue this one away."

"Before opening the case for the Defence," said Mr. Wainwright, "I have a submission to make on a point of law."

"Yes, Mr. Wainwright," said Mr. Justice Rowan courteously.

"I would submit," said Mr. Wainwright, "that there is no necessity for the Defence to put forward its case at all. It is one of the fundamentals of the English legal system that the Crown must make out its case. The Crown must show that the accused murdered Rosa Bezley by shooting her on September 28th at Binford Park Reservoir. Not that he was *at* the reservoir. Even if that were admitted—and it is far from being admitted—it is a fairly long step to take from saying that a man was *at* a place to saying that he committed a murder there.

"All the evidence as to the murder is circumstantial. I hasten to add—and I say this because I am certain his Lordship will say it, if I do not—that there are crimes which have to be proved by circumstantial evidence, because no other sort is available. But—" Mr. Wainwright turned round and glared for a moment at Mr. Younger, sitting impassively beside him—"there is circumstantial evidence *and* circumstantial evidence, and my learned friend will perhaps excuse me if I say that the evidence he has seen fit to produce is circumstantial to the point almost of non-existence.

"He was good enough to point out that no cogent motive exists. A number of motives have been put forward. Indeed, so many that they must have reminded the jury of the famous clock that struck thirteen, the last note being not only absurd in itself, but casting considerable doubt on the twelve that had gone before.

"The only direct link in the whole story which has been suggested, between the dead woman and the accused, is the gun. And observe how weak that link is. I should like to emphasize. It is not denied that this is the gun which fired the bullet that killed Mrs. Bezley. All the weighty scientific evidence bearing on this point can be accepted—and put on one side. What is left?

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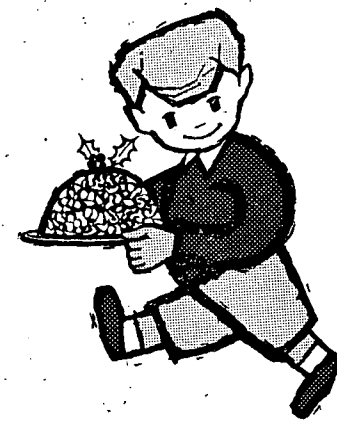

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Persons who say that they *think* they once saw the accused carrying a gun like the gun recovered from the water. That is the link which we are asked to believe will be strong enough to hang this man.

"I would say two things about it. First, that the pistol, as we have heard, is of a standard type, the P.38 issued to the German Army, and issued by the hundred thousand.

"The second point is that the witnesses who have, somewhat hesitantly, identified the pistol are neither of them worthy of a moment's credence in this Court. Both of them, as they admitted, are professional criminals with records of offences.

"I should therefore submit," concluded Mr. Wainwright, "with confidence, that the Defence has no case to answer."

The Judge said, "The Court is much obliged to you for your cogent presentation of this point. It must be ruled, however, as a matter of law, that the Crown has made out a case which requires answering."

"In that case," said Mr. Wainwright, rising to his feet with renewed energy, "I will call the prisoner."

"In the name of heaven," said Superintendent Haxtell, who was, by now, in a brittle temper, "in the name of heaven, why didn't you tell someone what you were up to?"

"Well, sir—"

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"You're a policeman. A member of a police force. You're quite entitled to have bright ideas, but when you have them, why not tell someone else about them and get them worked out properly?"

"I did tell someone. I told Kellaway that I was sure there was something else there."

"And what did he say?"

"He told me to leave it alone."

"Then why didn't you?" This was an awkward one. Petrella was saved by the telephone bell. It was Doctor Summerson.

"I've finished the autopsy," he said. "I gathered from your young man when he called me at four o'clock this morning that you might want the results in a hurry."

Haxtell said, "Hm."

"Very interesting, medically. The body had been weighted with three heavy pieces of marble fender inside the clothes, and it went straight down into the silt and stayed there. There's no current in a reservoir to knock it about, so it was in pretty good shape. I've sent the hands down to your laboratory."

"Will they get any prints?"

"No difficulty at all, I should say. The skin's pretty well intact. Particularly the right hand, that was under the body. This one was shot, too."

"You surprise me," said Haxtell bitterly.

"And has been dead, as far as one can tell, about the same length of time."

"Any chance of an identification—apart from the fingerprints?"

"Face and general appearance, you mean? No. Not a chance of that. I noticed an old dislocation of the hip. It might have made the man hobble a bit, or it might not. Difficult to say. Failing the prints, the best thing would be to wait till they've got the clothes dried and sorted out and try someone on them. I may have some more for you later."

Haxtell thanked him, and dialled the Water Board. He caught Mr. Lundgren at his desk. The Resident Supply Engineer said, "Another one? How? No one told me you were still working at the reservoir."

Haxtell passed that one up. He said, "What I wanted to find out was whether your man Ricketts had ever had a dislocated hip. It might have shown as a very slight limp."

"I'll look up his medical sheet," said Lundgren. "But I doubt if it'd show a thing like that. He was wounded, as a very young soldier, in the First War. Do you think—?"

"I'm afraid so, yes," said Haxtell. "He never got to Blackpool. He got in the way of whatever was going on that night. We may need you later on to look at his clothes."

Lundgren said he would do what he could. Time was going on. It was eleven o'clock.

Haxtell said, "There's one thing we must do. Tell Kellaway what's happened, and get the news down to the Court.

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"I don't know that it's going to make a lot of difference, but—"

Heavy steps in the corridor heralded the arrival of Chief Superintendent Barstow. He came through the door like a rhinoceros through a bamboo screen, turned a deeper shade of red when he saw Petrella, and jerked his head at him. Petrella removed himself.

Lurking nervously in the C.I.D. room he heard, muted by the intervening passage, the turbulent bass of Barstow in eruption, with shorter, softer passages from Haxtell's tenor. It was a performance which, at any other time, might have seemed amusing, but he felt no desire to laugh. He knew well enough that it was his bones they were fighting over.

"I think a certain amount of the blame must attach to Kellaway," Haxtell was saying. "I've noticed it before with these Central office types. They think the rules don't apply to them. Surely if there was a decision on policy to be taken—whether or not to carry on with the search after they found the gun—they should have referred it to you?"

"Certainly," said Barstow. It had not, in fact, occurred to him before, but the point was one well calculated to appeal to him.

"I'm not prejudging the question of whether or not the search should have been widened. If it had been put to me—"

"If it had been put to *me*," said Barstow, "I should have said, never leave a job half done. But the point is, that it wasn't put to me."

"Kellaway is probably so used to being called in by doddering old Chief Constables, and taking complete charge, and running their shows for them, that it didn't occur to him that while he was in a London District—"

"Exactly," said Barstow.

"I'm not saying it wasn't wrong of Sergeant Petrella to do what he did."

"Absolutely irregular."

"And if a disciplinary complaint has been made—"

"We must deal with that when it arises. The first thing is to get this news down to Kellaway."

"We tried his house as soon as we knew what it was all about, but he had gone. We tried the Court, too, but he hadn't turned up there."

"He could hardly leave Court until the summing up's over," said Barstow. "Try them again."

In Court Mr. Younger was questioning the prisoner. "So you never went to the Binford Park Reservoir?"

"That's right," said Howton.

"Neither on that night nor any other night?"

"That's right."

"And if you never went to the reservoir, of course you never went to the reservoir cottage?"

"That's right."

"Then how would you account for the fact that a full set of the

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prints of your right hand was found in the paintwork of the cottage window?"

"*If* they were found there."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow that answer."

"It's only the police say they found them."

"I see. You are suggesting that the whole of that evidence was faked by the police."

"That's right."

"The jury will have to decide for themselves on the value of that suggestion," said Mr. Younger politely. "Are you the owner of a blue Riley saloon car, registration number GKR 692?"

"No."

"Have you ever owned such a car?"

"No."

"Have you ever hired, or used, such a car?"

"Yes. I hired one."

"And you were using it in September last?"

"As far as I can remember."

"And, as you have heard, one of the witnesses, a Mrs. Gurney, observed a car with this number drive up to the reservoir, and a man whom she has identified as you, and the other men, who correspond closely in description to friends of yours, get out of it."

"I heard her say so."

"You mean that she made it up?"

"I mean, if she saw someone, it wasn't me."

"Then she made a mistake?"

"That's right."

"And she imagined the number of the car?"

"That's right."

"A curious coincidence that she should have imagined a number that exactly corresponded to the number of your car."

"Of course it wasn't a coincidence," said Howton. "The police told her what number to say."

"I see. The whole of this evidence is also an invention of the police."

"That's right," said Howton. "The police were after pinning the killing on to me. There's some sort of people, as soon as they read the papers, they'll come forward and say anything."

Why anyone should have imagined, thought Mr. Justice Rowan, that it was in the interests of the prisoner that he should be allowed to give evidence, passed the bounds of human understanding.

"Come again," said Petrella into the telephone. "You've got what? Damn this line. I'm sorry, I can't hear you. No, that's better."

"Sergeant Blinder, Fingerprints, here," said the voice patiently. "I want to speak to Sergeant Petrella."

"You're speaking to him."

"Oh, it's you is it, Patrick? Look here, I've got an identification for you."

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"Of those prints we sent you this morning? That's quick work."

"Not those. They're still working on them."

"What are you talking about, then?"

"A single print you submitted about a week ago."

"That," said Petrella. He'd forgotten all about it. "Who—?"

"It's not an absolutely firm identification, mind you. It wasn't a complete print."

"I think it's marvellous that you should have got anything out of it at all."

"It's a man called Bancroft."

The name meant nothing to Petrella.

"I found it on the Aged File. The man was a soldier. Age given on the card as eighteen. It was a charge of assault and robbery, but apparently the robbery was dropped, and it was heard as simple assault. I'd guess he was on leave, on a spree, or something."

"What year was all this?"

"1918."

Petrella passed this on to Superintendent Haxtell who was in the middle of a third unsuccessful attempt to get hold of Kellaway. He said, "I don't think there's much point in passing this little titbit on to the Director of Public Prosecutions until we know a little more about it. When are we going to get it?"

"Blinder said, in the course of the morning."

"Which probably means tea-time," said Haxtell. "Hullo, what's this?" His office window commanded the courtyard where the police cars stood. A police cadet motor-cyclist was propping his machine up. He had a large brown envelope in his hand.

"Something tells me," said Haxtell, "that this is it."

Petrella ran down the stairs, collected the envelope, signed for it, and came back with it.

"Quick work, for once," he said. "Now perhaps we shall find out something about Mr. Bancroft. Do you suppose—" He broke off.

Superintendent Haxtell was staring at the contents of the envelope in complete silence. From where he stood Petrella could see two photographs, and clipped to them a memorandum sheet headed Fingerprint Section, New Scotland Yard, and covered with typescript.

Haxtell finished reading the memorandum, turned it over to see if there was anything further on the back, and then parcelled it up with the photographs and put it slowly back in the envelope. Not until then did he say, "This is nothing to do with the gun. This is the report on the man you pulled out of the reservoir last night."

★ ***The last part of Blood on the Scales, by Michael Gilbert, appears in next month's Argosy on sale December 10***

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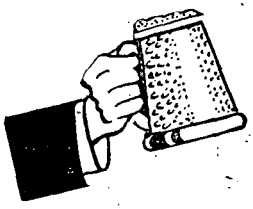


ALL THE BEST

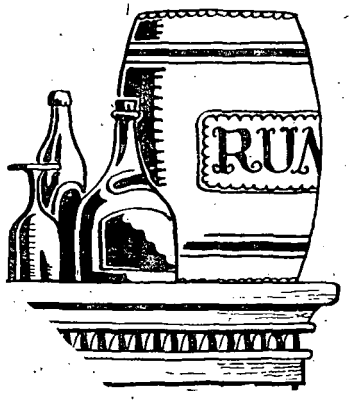
Argosy Guide to Christmas Cheer

"A Glass of Wine with you, sir"

BY RAYMOND POSTGATE

I REMEMBER vividly when that grand remark was first made to me. I was awed, elated, and perplexed. Awed, by the splendour of the invitation and of the speaker. He was, of course, a very mature man, thirty at least, and his manner was correspondingly authoritative. Elated, because of the prospect of elegant enjoyment that opened before me. Perplexed, because I had not the least idea of what wine I should ask for (or, rather, "express a preference for") or indeed even what wine tasted like. I was, in fact, a grotesquely and disgustingly ill-educated young man.

A few days later I was lying face downwards spread-eagled in an Oxford quadrangle, having been persuaded that it was a sensible thing to drink two quarts of strong ale. In that attitude, with the flash of clear-headedness that sometimes comes in such a position and circumstances, I decided that I had a call as a missionary. So far as I could help it, nobody of the coming generation should have to acquire his education with such discomfort and humiliation.



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27 JUDGES — Found Drinking

Last week I crammed 27 of my friends into my flat to help christen my new cellar. I was kept a prisoner at the bar, serving non-stop for two hours. Such is the penalty for inviting informed palates—really critical judges—to taste good wine. It all started when I ordered a 'SEPPELTS CELLAR STARTER KIT'—a dozen selected bottles of Australia's finest wine. With the first case I got a free gift—a wooden decanting corkscrew. Then I ordered two cases together—and got a superb wine rack which I swear on oath is worth £1. This is how you go about ordering yours (remember, one case and you get a corkscrew free, two and you get the wine rack).

Send in a cheque to Seppelts for 120/6, with your name and address, and the name and address of your local wine merchant. The case is sent to him, for you to collect, in a few days. A case contains the following :- 2 bottles Extra Dry Solero Sherry 13/- ea. (You can specify Old Reserve Solero if you prefer—it's sweeter). 2 bottles of Arawatta Hock 8/-ea. 1 bottle Rhymney Chablis 8/- ea. 2 bottles Chardonnay Sauternes 8/- ea. 2 bottles Chalambar Burgundy 8/- ea. 2 bottles Moyston Claret 8/- ea. 1 bottle Imperial Reserve 22/6 ea. (for champagne occasions) .It's a great way to start a cellar—and one you can be proud of; why not judge for yourself ?

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